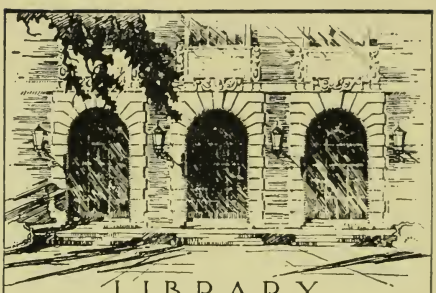
WEST OF SWARDHAM

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"TAY"



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WEST OF SWARDHAM

A Novel

BY

THE REV. W. O. PEILE,

AUTHOR OF "TAY."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

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WEST OF SWARDHAM.

CHAPTER I.

A STUDENT OF PHYSIOGNOMY.

THE ladies have just filed out of the dining-room at Swardham Hall, and the men have closed up to the end of the long table where John West has taken the seat vacated by his mother. Two only of the guests are parted by an interval of empty chairs and dishevelled napkins from the ranks of burly squires and comfortable parsons, who have already plunged into general conversation, evidently of absorbing interest to the party, and in which their host is bearing his share.

Of the lonely pair, one is Francis Holbrooke, rector of Swardham, a courteous little man of middle age, comely features, and prosperously neat appearance. The rector would fain be attending to the topic which is occupying his friends and neighbours, but that he has promised the lady of the house to 'look after' a guest who is the only stranger present, and no less a person than the new Lady Woollett's brother, on his first visit to Fleeces Park. Never has request of his loved and honoured friend Mrs. West failed of loyal obedience from the rector, but it is with some trepidation that he has buckled to the task of looking after this lean yellow gentleman with a strange accent, part Scottish, part foreign, who seems indeed perfectly competent to take care of himself. He has begun by flatly declining to entertain a suggestion timidly propounded, that they

should do as the rest have done, and close up.

'I find myself pairfectly comfortable where I am, thank ye,' said the yellow stranger, all regardless of a wistful glance which his companion could not quite suppress, 'pairfectly comfortable'—and with that he fished with his long legs under the table till he had secured a footstool, placed for the accommodation of one of the departed matrons; swept a dish of olives within easy reach, and settled himself back in his chair, as one prepared to make himself completely at home.

With mild astonishment the rector watched eight olives as they successively disappeared between those cadaverous jaws!

'Holbrooke, I hope you are looking after our friend,' says John West from his distant seat. 'What wine are you drinking, Mr. Auchmuty?'

The stranger bows, and makes a feint of appropriating half a glass of sherry left by one of the ladies, but declines uplifting his voice in audible answer.

'This is '34 port,' says the rector, appealingly, but Mr. Auchmuty only smiles as he impales another olive, and then utters foul treason against the contents of the Swardham cellars, and all vintages whatsoever known to Englishmen—treason such as never before had the rector heard at that hospitable board.

'Ask a native of the Peninsula to taste your ports and sherries,' the blasphemer goes on unabashed, 'and his answer would be mine. You have no wine, no natural product worthy of the name, in this country. And, if you had, you wouldn't drink it.'

After this there is nothing to do but, with all speed, to change the conversation, though it was with faint hopes that Mr.

Holbrooke entered upon any further discussion with so audacious a heretic. What might not follow from a man who contemned John West's best wine at his own table? Scarcely should the squire himself be safe of due respect at the mouth of such a fellow, and, courteous as the rector is, there are limits! He could not have sat still and heard any of the Wests disparaged.

'It is your first visit to this part of Longshire, I understand,' he says gently; 'I hope you like our country; the grass-lands are considered second to none in England.'

'Well, sir, as you ask me, I must say that for a small, over-populated island such as this, I consider it a waste, just a wanton, l*aw*mentable waste, that a district should be encumbered with useless woods, policies, and demesne lands as this is.'

'But surely you would not have such

houses as this, for instance, or Sir Tancred's at Fleeces, stand flush with a high-road, with just ground enough behind them to grow their garden-stuff?'

The long, narrow eyes of Mr. Auchmuty twinkled and then closed to mere slits, as he replied with much composure—

'Aye, sir, but I would, unless it could be proved that every man Jack among you, gentle or simple, had ground enough to grow *his* potatoes, and that there was still enough to spare for these great useless grounds.'

Alas for Sir Tancred! why could he not be faithful to the memory of good old Lady Woollett, buried not twenty months since? or if constrained to take another wife, why not have chosen among his kind, and the good old stocks of Longshire or other midland shires? Terrible, however, must be the retribution which had surely already over-

taken the easy-going baronet, constrained to welcome as the brother of his mature bride this ill-conditioned, parchment-looking being! It was almost sacrilege to discuss Swardham matters with one who had so plainly shown the cloven hoof, but the rector was ever polite and loyal to his engagements, and Mr. Auchmuty was now condescending to put him through a pretty vigorous catechism as to his parish, and the family who so worthily ruled it.

Now the rector was a man without guile, a man also whose lines had fallen in a pleasant place, as it seemed to him, and who was more than content with his lot. To his mind Swardham was a model parish, the rustics a model peasantry, John West a model squire, and John West's mother a saint on earth. So to all the stranger's questions he was able to return glowing answers, that came at least straight from

his honest heart. All the parish, he said, with insignificant exceptions, belonged to the squire, forming part of his broad ancestral acres. Nothing could be more satisfactory than the relations between landlord and tenant in this favoured spot. Nowhere were the poor less burdened or more devoted to their lords, or more respectful to the Church. Nowhere was such a bright example of charity and every virtue shown to rich and poor alike as by Mrs. West. Mr. Holbrooke's unfeigned enthusiasm is evidently entertaining to his questioner, though his amusement only peeps slyly from those Chinese eyes.

'A queen dowager is all very well till a queen consort appears,' he says maliciously, 'and then out she goes, whatsoever her merits, and your villagers will soon show themselves courtiers enough to worship the rising power. It's a wonder that such an

admirable Crichton of a laird has remained a bachelor so long.'

'Sir, no such change could make one jot of difference in the veneration in which we all hold the lady of this house. Indeed it is well known that Mrs. West wishes her son to choose a wife, and I trust his choice may fall on a daughter of some one of our good old county families, known and respected to us all.'

This with a keen sense of the wrong done by Sir Tancred Woollett in his late selection of a bride.

'A limited choice,' croaks Mr. Auchmuty, 'is one of the penalties of such an elevated position, something like the case of the princes of the blood royal.'

'Of course the head of a family of long descent and territorial importance should mate with one of like degree,' says the rector somewhat stiffly, 'and if there is

anything in the report that the Duke of Hexham's daughter is to be future mistress here, which I'm not in a position to assert, nor to contradict, mind you! it will be a most suitable alliance, the families being already related in blood.'

'Why, man, ye talk of long descent, but as far as anything could be gathered from Sir Tancred's muddled talk, poor gowk that he is at the simplest statement, it's but on the spindle side that your Squire is a West at all!'

'Mr. Auchmuty, there never was a truer West than the present squire; he has the form and features, aye, and character and temper, of the best of the long line! It's certainly true that his father was a Woodvil, a second cousin of the duke's, but he is the only grandson and the living image of old Squire West, and never was fitter representative of a worthy ancestry!'

Quite unmoved by this little display of vehemence, Mr. Auchmuty went on musingly—

'And the grandfather left the property past his only surviving child to a grandson. Will this be the secret trouble that I read in the face of the old lady that sat up yonder, or what else is it?'

Horror and astonishment have quite deprived the rector of breath, as he listens to this little less than impious utterance. Mrs. West a prey to secret trouble! the humblest, bravest, brightest of Christian women corroded at heart by some grief that could not bear the light of day! and this calumny spoken by a mere stranger, and spoken to him, her pastor, her almoner, her spiritual counsellor for thirty years! It was too much.

'Sir, you speak at random; you, as a stranger, speak to me, an intimate, in a

manner unwarranted by fact and good taste,' he managed to say at last.

But calmer than ever seems the other, as he replies with deliberation—

'It's just intimates that never remark what is always under their noses. I have made a study of *phee*siognomy for some years past, and am considered to have become not inexpert in its practical application; and I must adhere to my opinion that Mistress West has a secret weighing upon her; perhaps I should shock you if I added that her face shows to me the handwriting of remorse.'

'And this,' cries Holbrooke scornfully, 'is the result of how long a scrutiny! ten minutes in the drawing-room, and then a glimpse or two from the far end of this table.'

'I'll not say but what I might, in this case, have found sufficient time, even this

evening, to make my observations and deductions; but the fact is that I was present in your church on Sunday afternoon last, and as you addressed your sermon (as you'll doubtless remember) to the young who had been recently confirmed or are expectant of that rite, I, who am not young, and have got on very well so far without the imposition of episcopal hands, took the liberty of abstracting my attention, and then of studying the most remarkable face I could find in your church. It was Mistress West's face, and she was no more attending to your discourse than I was! The secret was claiming her attention, Mr. Rector; hidden remorse was leading her, willy nilly, on an old weary dance! She is not the woman, if I have any skill in reading the lineaments, to be disquieted about a trifle; and unless the secret is one that will die with her, you will remember

this little confidence of mine some day, when this Arcadia of yours may be upheaved with a genuine sensation. Now, if you were a Roman priest you would have had it all out long ago. By the bye, if you must be priests at all, wasn't it foolish of you to give up the father-confessor business?'

Disregarding this objection to the tactics of the Reformed Church, the rector, in tones very unlike those usual to him, observed—

'If your studies had been tinctured with common charity, sir, you would scarcely have conjured up such accusations against an admirable lady, whom none that know her could suspect of being under any such influences as you fancy. And now, sir, pray let the subject drop for ever.'

The last words were given in a cheerier tone, as Mr. Holbrooke perceived that his ordeal was over. Men were rising from their chairs and straddling towards the door, the

last sip of sherry had been swallowed, the last clink of a coffee cup had been heard, and the longest sitting which the rector had ever endured in that room was finished. Never before had the proposal to join the ladies sounded so rapturously in his ears. Once in the drawing-room, he could feel the task, which had taxed his loyalty and temper, discharged, and fly to more congenial company. Just one glance he gave, when that asylum was reached at last, to a bevy of girls clustering round the piano, to make sure that his daughter, who has not been of the dinner guests, has found her way safely to the Hall. A nod from a pretty little head with smooth coils of brown hair rewarded that careful glance.

'My girl wouldn't be the last a young fellow would pick out, be her company who they may,' thinks the fond father as he seeks the side of a brother parson.

'I could only catch a word or two of what was said over the wine,' he begins in an eager undertone, 'but tell me, like a good fellow as you are, Morgan, didn't the young squire half promise to stand for the county, as well as wholly engaging to take over the hounds?'

Mr. Morgan, a very stout and jolly-looking man, nodded his head till his fat cheeks shook about, and made answer, as he slowly rubbed his hands—

'Aye, aye! Sir Tancred and old Lenham put the thing in a way that was irresistible; and he's a fine fellow, the young squire, and will be a credit to Parliament. There will be a formal deputation by and by to invite him to stand. As to the hounds, he makes no difficulty, not a bit more than his grandfather before him; he'll take them, just whenever Cumby drops, and never ask for a subscription, I warrant.'

The eyes of the two parsons met, well pleased, and each chuckled, as men who feel that things are shaping just as they should. To Mr. Holbrooke especially the weal of the house of West stood second to no consideration, not even the future of the bright-faced girl yonder. It was delightful to him that the head of that house should be ready to assume such positions as the worthiest of his forefathers had often filled. Of John West's fitness for any position, or of the likelihood of his being called, in some such way as at present, by acclamation of his neighbours to an honourable eminence, the rector had never doubted, but he had harboured a secret dread lest the young squire's complaisance might not be found equal to his undoubted capacity. For it was indeed a fact, known to none better than his old friend and tutor, that, except from his mother, West was some-

what intolerant of advice, that he was confessedly somewhat wedded to his own opinions, somewhat disdainful of what he deemed twaddle; bad in short to lead, as he was bad to beat. In such a matter as this invitation to contest the division of his county at the next election, a suspicion of patronage, an attempt to pat him blandly on the back, might so easily have sent him off at a tangent, utterly mutinous and impracticable. But it was plain that Mr. Lenham and the baronet of Fleeces Park (who were among the leading Conservatives of the district) had been discreet so far and wary, and great was the satisfaction diffused by the news that West of Swardham was to be the true blue candidate, come next election.

Soothed and gratified as the rector had been by this colloquy with his brother-parson, and by the expressions of satisfac-

tion which he heard on all hands at the present prospect, both sporting and political, his thoughts reverted before the end of the evening to the strange, uncomfortable man who had spoiled his relish for his glass of port that night, and who had ventured to base strange, uncomfortable theories on something which he professed to discern in the face of the best woman in the world, one

> 'Half-canonized by all that look'd on her,
> So gracious was her tact and tenderness.'

There she sat, her slim and upright figure, all in black velvet and delicate point d'Alençon, in high relief against the exuberant outline and lightly-tinted draperies of Sir Tancred Woollett's elderly bride. Her white hair is smoothed from an unruffled brow; her finely-cut features, her placid and gracious expression, are as serenely admirable as they have appeared to Mr.

Holbrooke for half his lifetime. As he prolongs his scrutiny the room is hushed for a song, and while Lady Woollett falls comfortably back to fan and listen, and all eyes turn to the piano, where two pretty girls are warbling a duet, he sees a sudden change pass over Mrs. West's face, which fills him with vague disquietude; for in a moment the peace of that refined, handsome countenance seems to have fled. The brows are slightly contracted, the eyelids droop wearily, the lips are set painfully, and the fingers of one thin, well-shaped hand are nervously clasped and unclasped around the other wrist. In a very few minutes the song is over, and guests, mindful of long homeward drives, are making for their hostess to tender their adieu. But they do not see the face which has just troubled the rector. In a moment Mrs. West is herself again, calm, courteous, serene of

aspect, gracious in manner. It must have been a passing qualm, on which none would base comments but a prying, prating stranger. It was rubbish, mere impertinent drivelling on this Auchmuty's part; and yet, indignant as it made him, that slander haunted the rector and set him a-thinking.

'Mary,' he said, taking his daughter's hand within his great-coat sleeve as they started for the rectory, 'you are an observant little maid, and you love and honour Mrs. West, I know; do you see any change in her of late?'

Pretty Mary Holbrooke slackened her pace along the smooth gravel as she collected her straying thoughts to answer her father.

'Any change, papa? I have never put it before myself directly, as your question puts it, but all this year I have had a

consciousness of something—what shall I call it?—of some sort of shadow, which has fallen on her dear, noble spirit. She is as good and delightful as ever, but not as happy perhaps. What can be the cause, do you think, papa?'

But, beyond an inarticulate groan, the rector gave his daughter no answer. He was indeed too dismayed to speak. How was it that a change in his most valued friend, a change palpable to babes and sucklings, and to casual visitors, should have made no impression on him? But was it not rather that, like his daughter, he had never put any direct question to himself on the point? With uneasiness he began to recall various indications that all was not as it had been with Mrs. West. Not since Easter (and it was now November) had she knelt among the few communicants around the holy table at which he minis-

tered; she who had been so regular in her religious duties. Humble-minded as she had ever been, and averse to hear herself praised, there had been almost horror in her manner when, on several recent occasions, she had, with vehement self-abasement, repudiated some encomium offered to her charitable zeal. And to-night there had been, while the attention of the rest was distracted from her, that sad scared look, so foreign to those calm features. Alas! he had deserved the sneer levelled by this Scotch heathen at his priesthood. A wiser, better man, though no Roman confessor, might perchance have spared this noble heart some suffering which now is burdening it—suffering innocently incurred, for of wrong-doing no taint could cleave to Rachel West.

Thus musing the rector hurried his child through the darkling shrubberies, and stood

at last at his own porch; and, like a good girl as she was, Mary respected his meditations, and kept discreet silence, till she bid her father a filial good night.

CHAPTER II.

WESTS PAST AND PRESENT.

THE Wests of Swardham were, as has been intimated by the family's staunch champion, the rector, a long-descended house; indeed their unbroken connection with their hereditary acres could not be paralleled in all Longshire, if elsewhere in the Midlands. Exalted as was the rank of the Duke of Hexham, the Woodvils, a family of the north country, had only been in Longshire since George the First's reign, when the then Earl of Hexham had married the heiress of Marloes. As to the Fitz Raymonds, the epoch was scarcely beyond

the memory of a few surviving patriarchs when the eminent law-lord and founder of that imposingly-named branch of nobility had bought Smugby, and christened the Palladian pile, which he built on the site of the old hall, 'Beausite.' Neither peerage had ever eclipsed the glories and the pre-eminence of Swardham in the eyes of true Longshire folk. As there was no larger, so was there no better landlord than Squire West, whether grandsire or grandson. The fine old red-brick house, in its stately park, was the scene of no intermittent hospitalities; for if the Longshire folk appreciated the Wests, they in turn made their only home amid the Longshire grass-lands and elms, leaving Swardham seldom and reluctantly, and returning to it gladly and with all possible despatch.

A worthy representative of his house in all respects had been John West, spoken of

in these pages as the old squire. About him, in the old hall where he himself was born, there sprang children, of whom three alone survived infancy, two sons and one daughter, the same Rachel West for whom the rector is, in her old age, growing anxious. The elder son, John, was in all things the counterpart of his father. To him, as also to his sister, had descended the commanding figure, the dark hair, and haughty, regular features characteristic of generations of Wests. The younger son, Adolphus by name, resembled the family of his mother, whose darling and youngest born he was. Delicate from his childhood, he had been spoiled and fondled by maternal partiality, and grew up a fragile, wilful stripling, on whom his father looked with little favour. Never, so the old squire declared, had a West been unwilling to look all the world full in the face, till this saucy shaver appeared,

with his shifty blue eyes and receding chin, his dandified ways and girlish petulance. But John West loved his wife, and for her sake took little apparent notice of the boy's peculiarities, endeavouring to trust him as he trusted his other children. In due time Adolphus went up to Christ Church, and it was in his second term that his mother died, commending her boy with her last breath to her husband's forbearance, and to the special care of his elder sister. Rachel West indeed discharged her trust as far as in her lay right loyally and lovingly, but between Adolphus and his father a breach presently opened which widened rapidly, until a sad and unexpected ending parted the twain for ever. At Oxford Adolphus had done nothing to conciliate his sire or enhance his own reputation. There were, on the contrary, troubles without end for the proud squire as long as his son's uni-

versity career lasted—money troubles to begin, then rustication and other troubles with the authorities, culminating in expulsion, and, alas! disgrace. Deeply stung by his son's previous conduct, the father was at last wounded to the quick by the announcement that the lad was not only a gambler, but a fraudulent gambler, a detected cheat. In his agony of rage and humiliation he forbade the name of Adolphus to be mentioned in his presence, and swore to erase him from his heart and consideration for ever. It is questionable indeed whether relief did not outweigh all paternal regrets when, within three months of his expulsion from Oxford, Adolphus died at a London lodging-house, after a short illness, from which dissipation, and possibly despair, forbade his rallying. Wretched, however, as was this closing scene of a misspent life, the dying man was not abandoned to hireling hands.

His sister, then a bride of a few months' standing, was in London with her husband, and, when summoned to the sick chamber, stayed there to the sad end, doing all that woman's love could suggest to soothe those awful hours. In her kind ear Adolphus poured all his miserable confessions, and, thanks to her sisterly consolations, he passed away less comfortless than many a better man.

Within two short years Rachel Woodvil sat by another deathbed, but this time it was her own husband whose eyes she closed. Handsome, popular, and thriftless, George Woodvil was probably saved by an early death from the melancholy decline and fall which overtakes most of his class. As it was, the glamour of early love was not yet dispelled from the young wife's affections, and though Woodvil left behind him, out of a once ample fortune, barely

sufficient to pay his debts, his widow's heart never conceived a reproach against his improvidence, and their boy was taught to love his father's memory, although he resigned after a time that father's name. Ill, however, as in worldly gear she was left by her husband, her father's love and care shielded the widow and her baby son from all nearer acquaintance with the woes of poverty. The very day after Woodvil's funeral, the squire brought his daughter and the child home to Swardham, and the old house rejoiced to find once more a mistress. Nor was Rachel less cordially welcomed by her only surviving brother, who was still a bachelor, and took his full share in making much of her and petting his sturdy little nephew.

Thus in peace and amity the years passed on, and the breaches torn by storms of sorrow in the stalwart old squire had been

closed and well-nigh obliterated, when once more his proud head was bowed before the blast of adversity as he stood by the corpse of the sole inheritor of his ancient name, his eldest gotten and the son of his love.

John West the younger was a mighty hunter, a fearless and judicious rider, one skilled in all the arts of horsemanship, and victor in many a trying tussle with half-broken colts and stubborn beasts. And yet for this man, so famed in the field, so proof for over twenty seasons against all accidents, it was reserved that he should meet his death within the familiar enclosure of his father's park, and by a fall from a steady old hunter ridden for exercise and old association's sake upon a summer's afternoon. A feeble folk are the conies, but it was one of these which, straying and burrowing where none had strayed before, caused old Tartar to come down amid his

easy swinging gallop as though he had been shot, and pitched Tartar's master over his ears, to light upon his head amid the uncurling ferns. The old horse scrambled up presently, shaking and shivering, and limped with a strained pastern towards his stable, but the rider never stirred again from where he lay among the brake with his head strangely bent beneath him. They said afterwards that had he been equipped as for the hunting field, his tall hat might have broken his fall and saved his life, but there could be no protection in the light cap which he wore. It might be, but John West was a heavy man, heavy as well as tall, as they had reason to remark who bore him on a hurdle to the old hall door, where the father met the bearers, and saw at a glance what had occurred.

'His neck is broken,' said the old squire

as he turned at last away, and withdrew from men's eyes.

It seemed to him in that black hour that the world was ended for him, and that the dead only were to be envied their lot. But the old squire lived on, lived to be cheered by his daughter's constant tenderness and his grandson's bright promise, lived till in his latest days he would confuse at times the living with the dead, and believe that the John whose youthful presence he loved was verily his own first begotten restored from out of the past.

From the moment in which he began to recover himself from the stupor of affliction that had weighed him down when his last remaining son was thus suddenly taken from him, the old man had designated as his sole heir this last offshoot from the old stock, and by his desire mother and son had at once dropped their name of Woodvil for

that of West. It was then a comfort to the squire that his grandson had inherited nothing from his dead father save blood fit to mix with that of the Wests'; nothing that could threaten to rival or diminish Swardham's importance in its next possessor's eyes. And on all hands it was admitted that in young John West, as he grew up to man's estate, no characteristic was lacking that had distinguished the house of Swardham; that he was as masterful and proud, as honourable and manly as any that had come before him: a stiff-necked man perhaps among his equals, but a kind master and a good friend to the poor, for whom he would always have a pleasant word.

Three years of energetic idling at Eton saw young West's longest absences from Swardham, for to college he resolutely declined to go, and though his grandfather would laugh at him and quote, 'Home-

keeping youths have ever homely wits,' the old man was secretly well content to have his few remaining years gladdened by his heir's constant presence; while as to Rachel West, she fondly thought her boy's passionate attachment to his home yet another proof of his superiority to all other youngsters of like age. And so, beyond a little reading of a lax description under Mr. Holbrooke's gentle supervision, John West's education was supposed to be finished when he left Eton, where he had forgotten a little of his small grounding in general knowledge, and merely acquired a facility of knocking off a copy of Latin verses. Fortunately, however, for the lad, his mother was a well-read woman, proficient in French, and not ignorant of other European languages, and the deep love which subsisted between the pair made it easy for the one to impart and the other to acquire a respectable

fund of knowledge more useful than the knack of stringing together hexameters and pentameters.

To her who had so well stood to him in the stead of both parents, John West felt that he owed all the culture of which he could boast, and deficient as this may seem to the learned youth of a more advanced day, it sufficed to enable the young squire to hold his own, and more, among the chiefs of Longshire society. With most of the squires it was enough that West was a capital rider and shot, and had sound ideas as to the management of an estate. They would indeed have liked him less and feared him more had he been reputed overwhelmingly book-learned.

The old squire had been gathered to his fathers, after lingering on to a most venerable old age, some two years before this story opens, and John West was squire in

his stead, but as yet he had made no change in his manner of life, well content to dwell among his own people, and in no hurry, though he had now passed his thirtieth year, to bring a wife home to dispute his mother's beneficent sway.

Admirably indeed did Rachel West fill her station as lady of the Hall, and wisely and well did she rule the great house, which had been her home from birth to age, save for those three short years of married life. Not her old friend the rector only, but many neighbouring clergy, and still more of the neighbouring poor, held her as a sainted being, living only to do good to all with whom she came in contact. Nor, amid her ceaseless charities, was Mrs. West neglectful of her social duties. It was agreed on all hands that no more perfect pattern of a hostess, no brighter ornament of the genial society of the county, could be found than

the lady of Swardham, of whom it was often remarked that she had made a hard if not a hopeless task for any woman who should succeed her as mistress of the Hall.

CHAPTER III.

SNAKES IN ARCADIA.

IT was a bright morning a few days after the dinner-party described in our first chapter, and Swardham village was giving proof that even in November it could look pretty under a bright blue sky, in spite of mud and fallen leaves. Though the tall elms were all but stripped of their glory, the sturdy oak on the little green retained its foliage, now bleached to a pale russet, until the first sharp frost should give the signal for the leaves to come whirling down upon the parish pound and the roof of the little round-house, or lock-up for trivial

offenders. There were ivy-covered gables too fronting the little street, and a few monthly roses making a show still against white cottage walls.

From the little wicket at the corner of his garden the rector emerges, bound for his schools, and with his daughter by his side. A bright cheery girl is this Mary Holbrooke, as she picks her way with elastic steps among the puddles left by yesternight's down-pour, and jokes with her more heavy-footed sire. She has a fair skin and the rosiest of checks. Her mouth is small and pretty, and as she laughs often, it can be seen that her teeth are beautiful—white, small, and even. Decidedly her mouth and dimpled chin, and the shape of her head and outline of her face, have not a fault to be found with them. Her head is well set on too, and her figure lithe and graceful, though evidently robust. And if her

nose is something broader and her bright eyes something smaller than might content critics, at least her brown hair is smooth and glossy, and her expression so cheerfully animated, that it might well be forgiven to her fond father if he took pride in his only child's appearance, and loved to see her always neat and trim, and thoroughly well-dressed on fitting occasions.

'Who in the world can that be standing at the wheelwright's?' cries Mary suddenly. 'Do look, papa; did you ever see such an oddity?'

Odd enough certainly, as far as the back view went (and they could see no more), was the figure towards which they were advancing. It was that of a tall thin man, apparently absorbed in reading a printed bill stuck on one of the wheelwright's shutters. From neck to heel this form was clad in a shiny casing of white mackintosh,

but over either shoulder and finally round the waist, girdle fashion, a long plaid of many-hued tartan was deftly arranged. On the head was a quaint cap, with many fur-lined flaps, now tied up by strings which met over the crown in a sort of crest or top-knot; and finally, on the hands, which were clasped behind the back and held a huge and knotted staff, were vast gauntlets of fur and leather the like of which Swardham had never seen. No wonder that the men in the work-shop were grinning out of the door, or that a small train of school-eschewing urchins, truants or baby-carriers, were gaping at a safe distance on the other side of the street.

Strangers were rarities in Swardham street, and if the rector did not gape himself, he went as near it as a mannerly beneficed clergyman could go. But while

his eyes were fixed on the tall unknown, the latter turned abruptly round, and revealed, as he greeted the parson and his daughter, the unwelcome lineaments of Mr. Auchmuty. There was no mistaking those twinkling eyes that gazed through apertures contracted to mere slits, nor that yellow lantern-jawed visage, and if the rector had considered these peculiarities objectionable when the man was clothed in ordinary evening dress, that puritan uniform which gives such small scope for variety or display, he found them almost offensive when set off by the queer garb which has been described. And there was a sort of look of triumph in the man's face as he hailed the unwilling rector, which the latter found bad to bear, even while he murmured some response to the other's greeting and strove to pass on.

'Not till ye've read this, if ye're in the

biggest of hurries. Why, it con*sairns* you deeply, meenister! it's an attempt to enlighten your flock, for which their pastor should be grateful.'

Mary Holbrooke opened her eyes in amazement as her father, most ungraciously for him, turned to read the printed handbill newly stuck on the wheelwright's shutter. It was headed, 'To the labouring men and women and all toilers of Longshire,' and after some short and trenchant lines to the effect that they who too patiently bear the yoke do not deserve to be free, invited every adult worker in Swardham to attend a meeting to be held on the night next but one following in Mr. Hockrill's great barn, when a deputation from the 'Rights of Man Assertion Society' in Longborough would be present, and the meeting would be addressed by Messrs. Barnett, Van Lennep, and other well-known

champions of the oppressed, and resolutions proposed in condemnation and amendment of the present land system, game laws, payment of tithes, &c., &c., &c.

The malicious Auchmuty, as he narrowly watched the rector's face during the reading of this document, enjoyed so rare a treat that he could scarce refrain from chuckling aloud, and, his victim facing him at last with ill-concealed annoyance and dismay, he burst out—

'Aha! it *does* con*sairn* you then! but of course in a parish such as this of yours, so unanimous, so blest in its temporalities and spceritualities alike, these fellows will only lose their pains, perhaps find themselves back at Longborough with a flea in each ear; perhaps even make acquaintance with your horse-pond first! Odd though that they should so easily secure a place for their meeting, and that these bills should

be allowed to remain in every prominent point of the place! It's that that annoys ye! but you'll see how your fine faithful fellows will put these rascals to shame and confusion when it comes to an argument. Yet their effrontery *is* irritating! The idea of their fancying that there was a promising field for them in *this* little heaven below!' and Mr. Auchmuty uplifted his great gloves towards heaven above, as if overcome by the depravity of these intruders.

Mr. Holbrooke, who had by this time regained outward equanimity, coldly made answer that though this was a new and unexpected development of a mischievous activity, no immunity from such visitations could be secured while Longborough, a vile radical place, was only six miles distant.

'Neither is the owner of the barn here mentioned, nor yet is his brother, who

has bought this wheelwright's business, a Swardham man. They come from close by Longborough, and are new settlers and nobodies among us. I trust Sir Tancred and Lady Woollett are well. Good morning to you, Mr. Auchmuty, unless I can be of any further service, for my girl and I are overdue at the 'schools.'

Having, as he termed it to himself, taken a glorious rise out of a prejudiced parson, Mr. Auchmuty was willing to let him depart, and with an angular bow to Mary, stalked off in the opposite direction.

'Now, Heaven forgive Sir Tancred,' cried the rector when fairly under way again, 'for bringing that man into Longshire! Faugh! he is worse than those wretched agitators, who, one hopes, know no better. If his sister is anything like him they'll kill poor old Woollett between them.'

'He's very sarcastic, papa, and certainly

disagreeable, and most extraordinary to look at; but I don't think it follows that Lady Woollett is a bad sort of woman. She seemed good-natured though she talked more about "poor Mr. Fife," who was her first husband, I believe, than I should quite like, were I Sir Tancred. But you mustn't be put out by people who are here to-day and gone to-morrow, which is equally true and comforting concerning Mr. Auchmuty or the men from Longborough.'

The rector shook his head dubiously, and being by this time at the door of his schools, was parted from his daughter for a while. He was soon seated as usual with a circle of the elder scholars round him, and the Scripture lesson was in progress; but never before had the class found so little attention from their instructor. The rector was always disposed to be lenient, but to-day he actually allowed glaring errors to

pass unnoticed, and once or twice he was suddenly roused by loud tittering to the consciousness that something ridiculous had been said or done of which he, who was responsible for the maintenance of decency and order, was totally oblivious.

'He said Bath-babby, please, sir! that's the way he's read Bethabara twice, please, sir! and you never said nothing. Bath babby indeed!' and a giggle ran round the circle.

Yet neither this candid appeal nor other similar reminders availed to rescue the rector from his brown study, or to restore the damaged discipline of the Bible-class. The sight of this ill-omened man had brought back to Mr. Holbrooke's mind all his apprehensions with regard to Mrs. West. He was an easy-going man, of a sanguine turn of mind, and the fears aroused on the evening of the dinner-party had been since

partially lulled. He had indeed only seen Mrs. West at church, and for a moment as she passed the rectory gate after service; but she had looked as well and cheerful as usual, and he had been glad to persuade himself that there was nothing amiss with her. To-day, however, since his encounter with Mr. Auchmuty, his doubts and fears seemed to have revived, and considerable as was his chagrin at the threatened incursion of Longborough demagogues, he brooded rather over the man's mysterious insinuations against Mrs. West's peace of mind, than over any word which he had uttered just now in the village street.

It was over at last, and the class dismissed, the good boys and usual favourites more or less dispirited for lack of appreciation, the wilder spirits rampant with the glee of unrebuked and triumphant naughtiness. The rector sighed as he put on his

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hat, and waited a minute or two for his daughter to emerge from the room sacred to the girls. Was there indeed some serpent in his Eden? and was he henceforth to live in terror of finding its slimy track in all the fairest places? His heart swelled with thankfulness as his daughter joined him, blithe, rosy, and briskly inspired with a sense of a good hour's work finished. Here at least he would defy any serpent to coil, and while Mary was, as now, his own loved, loving child, undimmed by care or sorrow, black indeed would be the hour in which her brightness would not shed sufficient light, cruel the pang which she could not cheat of its sharpness.

'Were you thinking of going up to the Hall for lunch to-day, my dear?' he asked, as they turned into the road.

Lunch at the Hall was an informal elastic meal, at which the rector and Mary usually

assisted twice or so in the week, dropping in without special invitation.

'And you'll come too, won't you, papa?'

'Not to-day, dear, I think, not to-day. But I'll walk part of the way with you.'

He longed yet dreaded to convince himself by further observations of the truth or untruth of the surmises of the student of physiognomy, which had fallen on him like a stone into the bosom of some quiet pool, and hence came a state of indecision.

'Why,' says Mary, 'isn't this Willie Turner? and why are you not at school, Willie, and what are these?'

A flaxen-headed boy of twelve, in patched corduroys and a large clean collar is confronting them, in his hand a fluttering sheaf of small hand-bills.

'Please, miss, father says it's time I arnt summut, and I've got this job from Mester 'Ockerill. Will you be pleased to take one,

miss? and you, sir, please? they pay me by how many I can get folks to take, and trustens to my honour not to make away with none, and pretend as how I have give 'em to folks.'

With this, after handing over two of his bills, the important functionary bustled away to the other side of the road, where he entered forthwith into a long complicated and lively passage of arms with an illiterate and very deaf old woman, who resisted his proffer of a bill as a dire and wanton indignity.

'They are more notices of this precious meeting to-morrow,' says the rector with a snort of contempt, 'padded with quotations from ribald, atheistical, chartist books. Upon my word, things have come to a pretty pass, when such trash is foisted on one by one's own day-scholars in Swardham Street,' and the rector crumpled up his

paper viciously, and jerked it over into Widow Skerrett's pig-stye.

'Put yours in your pocket, Mary, my dear, and if they haven't heard of this intrusion at the Hall, you can show them the kind of thing that our very children are being corrupted with.'

'I'll take care of it, papa; but I don't suppose any of the children, even Willie Turner himself, will wade through such a closely printed thing, and all so dull and stupid too. I'm quite glad that anything wicked should be so unalluring,' and innocent little Mary pocketed the wicked sheet with all the grace imaginable.

'Take special notice of dear Mrs. West, Mary, when she thinks no one is minding her, and so on. I shall want to know whether you think there is a trace of that shadow you told me of.'

'Very well, papa; I'm sure to watch her,

because I always do; no one else is so well worth noticing. But why don't you come and make your own observations?'

'Young eyes are sometimes better than old, my dear,' says the rector, and trudges back from the lodge-gate through the mud towards the village, forgetful of his luncheon, while Mary speeds gaily along the smooth gravel to the old red Hall.

CHAPTER IV.

MOTHER AND SON.

THE long lofty dining-room looks very pleasant to-day, with the sunlight streaming through its tall windows and lighting up the many paintings which hang on the panelled walls. It is just one of those well-proportioned, well-furnished, perfectly ventilated rooms which never seems crowded by a large party, or ghostly when, as now, there is but one guest to support the mistress of the house. In thorough keeping with her surroundings is Rachel West. She is a tall woman, still as upright as when she was a famous horse-woman,

and though her dark hair has become very white, the lustre of her large brown eyes is undimmed, and her pale complexion is untarnished by sallowness, nor are there many lines upon her ample forehead. She is plainly but well dressed in black, and wears a widow's cap, but a cap so worn and fashioned as to be anything but unbecoming.

Mary Holbrooke has been from her childhood a prime favourite with Mrs. West, and for some years past the pair have been constantly associated in all those departments of parish work which are best undertaken by feminine tact and diligence, and so successful are they in their endeavours, that no poor woman in Swardham need deplore the fact that her rector is a widower. To-day, as the squire, who is wont laughingly to taboo what he calls 'parish shop,' has ridden over to Marloes, Mrs. West and Mary have had it all their

own way, and the elder woman has encouraged the girl to talk, looking now and then fondly on her animated face. Their meal and their chat have come to an end, when Mary exclaims :

'Oh, I nearly had forgotten that I have in my pocket something most wicked and shocking, which I'm to show you! Don't be alarmed, it's nothing that will go off with a pop, and its wickedness isn't catching, or papa wouldn't have intrusted it to me. Willie Turner is up and down street putting these things into the hands of the unwary passer-by, and papa looked ready to box the poor boy's ears.'

As she spoke she smoothed out the hand-bill on the table, and passed it to her hostess with a comical glance, and then bent to reprove an importunate terrier, who was begging at her side, and had presumed to give her one or two impatient digs with

his shaggy paw. For a minute or so Mary stooped over Waxy, and as she lectured him stroked the hair over his bright eyes, then raising herself, turned towards Mrs. West to ask what the stupid deputation meant which had almost made her father cross. But the word died on her parted lips as her eyes fell on her friend's face. With the hand-bill laid in front of her on the table Mrs. West sat rigid and speechless, staring into vacancy, with a terror-struck expression in her eyes. In a moment she seemed to have aged and fallen away, and the hands tightly clasped before here were trembling painfully. In an instant Mary was at her side.

'You are ill, dear Mrs. West,' she cried, trying to control her alarm, 'do let me ring and tell them to fetch Dr. Leith, or will you lie down here?—Oh pray speak to me, and tell me what to do!'

But Mrs. West was plainly unconscious of her words if not of her presence, for she still sat staring fixedly before her, till suddenly, springing to her feet, she hid her eyes behind her shaking hand, and cried out, in a hoarse voice all unlike her usual gentle tones:

'Here! here in Swardham! it is fated; and can I resist?'

Then, as an ashen pallor overspread her features, she rocked to and fro, and fell to the ground in a swoon so sudden that the terrified girl was unable to prevent her measuring her length upon the carpet. First flying to the bell, Mary knelt by her friend and supported her head, and there were soon helpers enough, who, with many questions and ejaculations, moved the prostrate lady to a couch in an adjoining room. In marvellously short space, as it seemed to Mary, both doctor and rector

were on the spot, and the former enjoining perfect quiet for his patient, whose consciousness had now returned, father and daughter withdrew in unfeigned tribulation of spirit.

'I cannot tell; I saw nothing to account for the seizure, or prepare us for it,' Mary had said fifty times in answer to anxious inquiries, and now, alone with her father, she could say little more. 'Of course it can have nothing to do with it, but I *had* just given Mrs. West one of Willie Turner's hand-bills. She certainly took it from me just before she was taken ill, and up to that moment was just as usual, indeed in better spirits than she has often been of late. I don't even know whether she read the thing, for I was playing with Waxy,' (this in a tone of compunction,) 'and when I looked up again, there was our dear Mrs. West looking as though she had seen some fearful

apparition, and I was so frightened that what else happened before she swooned and the servants came I can't recollect a bit. Whether it was the hand-bill or not, I shall detest all such things more heartily than ever, as they will always remind me of this distress, and I should like to tear them all down—look, papa, where they have stuck them,' and Mary pointed with much disfavour to a stunted apple tree, growing in a garden hedge, which was decorated with one of the small bills, offering indeed no room for the larger sort upon its meagre trunk.

The rector stopped and looked stolidly at the unpleasing object, which, unpleasing as it was, seemed to offer no just cause for the sudden consternation and swooning of the squire's mother. Indeed, from where he stood Mr. Holbrooke could only read two lines, in larger type than the rest,

and these merely gave the names of the orators of the deputation—'Barnett and Van Lennep.' With a sigh and a shake of the head the rector plodded onwards.

'God forbid,' he said presently—'God forbid that this unaccountable seizure is a symptom of grave danger! If we should lose her, none can ever make good the loss to any of us. Perhaps, Mary, it was this which has been hanging over her, and causing that shadow which you fancied you noticed where all used certainly to be sunshine.'

Tender-hearted Mary pulled down her veil abruptly as her eyes brimmed at the suggestion, and could find no words in reply, having indeed much ado to restrain a rising sob.

'The poor squire,' the rector goes on, 'how distressed he will be at what has happened in his absence! There was

nothing to be gained by sending a groom to bring him home, because he will have started from Marloes long since, and he never lets the grass grow under his feet.'

Meanwhile the young squire, mounted on his favourite hack, was hardly justifying the rector's description, as he sauntered along the lanes, evidently occupied with his thoughts. Past many a spinny and gorse he rode, along many a wide pasture, within hearing of not a few purling brooks, any or all of which might have suggested trains of thought and roused reminiscences in one who as boy and man had hunted for some fifteen seasons in Longshire. But it is not of the chase of wily Reynard, or of his own prospects as destined master of the familiar hounds that John West ruminates to-day. He is contemplating a step far more momentous than aught connected with the hunt, nothing less indeed than

matrimony. And the lady whom he has almost resolved to make his bride, is, as the rector has hinted, no other than the Duke of Hexham's eldest daughter, Lady Emily Woodvil. He had left her an hour ago in the conservatory at Marloes, somewhat disappointed, if the truth must be told, that the interview had ended without her being absolutely asked to change her name to West.'

'He will write to your father, my dear,' the duchess said to her daughter, who withheld no confidence from her admirable parent; 'there is a sort of fine old-fashioned courtesy about Mr. West which would be sure to influence him to write to your father before speaking quite decisively to you; and really it's much to be commended and quite uncommon in these days.'

Lady Emily pouted, as though she would not have objected to the final disappearance

of all such old-fashioned ways, but resigned herself to trust in her mother's superior wisdom. From this glimpse at the privacy of the high-born ladies of Marloes it will be seen that John West ran no risk of ill-success in his suit. It is indeed doubtful whether a son-in-law less decidedly eligible than the possessor of Swardham might not have found favour, for the Lady Emily was now eight-and-twenty, and after ten seasons, somewhat less sanguine of success than when she had been presented. Though the favourite, as she was the eldest child of her mother, and endowed with a good figure, a good complexion, and regular features, Lady Emily Woodvil had officiated as bridesmaid to many of her compeers, and lastly to her own sister, a chit of nineteen, with a dark skin and a snub nose, and no notion of her own dignity, who during the past summer had been betrothed

and wedded to the eldest son of an earl. Can it then be wondered that the stately Emily was anxious not to return to London, scene of so many disappointments, still unengaged, or that her grace of Hexham lost no opportunity of furthering her girl's wishes?

The duke's health had long been precarious; his heir, the son of a previous marriage, bore no particular love to his stepmother and half-sister; and the duchess was well aware of the importance of making her hay while the sun shone, as she could not hope it would continue to shine on a dowager with a jointure somewhat modest for ducal maintenance of even widowed state. So John West's visits to Marloes had been made very pleasant to him, and especially of late had been tolerably frequent. The duke's interest for his impending candidature, the duke's advice as to his

contemplated mastership of the hounds, these had been excellent cards for a woman of the world to play, and had given ample cause for increasing intercourse between Marloes and Swardham. And though the duke himself, cooped up in a dull library, and afflicted with asthma, had not after all found much to say to his guest, still that little had been so said as to convey to John West only pleasant and friendly impressions, and its brevity had been more than counterbalanced by the reception always accorded in the drawing-room.

'Your fathers were cousins,' the duchess had said, 'so you are cousins, and it's absurd to affect to make a stranger of you here.'

It is questionable whether the cousinship between the duke and poor George Woodvil, which indeed existed only in the second or third degree, would not have passed

vanishing point in its transmission to their children, had George's son inherited no more than his father's deficient assets; but there is no question but that the duchess reminded her visitor very gracefully of the tie of kindred, and that Lady Emily behaved very prettily to her relative. Huge was the interest displayed in the young squire's ambition, whether to represent the county or bear sway over kennels and huntsmen, touching the solicitude manifested as to dear Mrs. West's well-being; and though the duchess was sometimes called away by her invalid lord, or other duties of her station, she never hesitated to leave her child with her cousin, while Emily, when so left, was for her part unwearied in her attempts to make the hours pass pleasantly for him at Marloes. Pleasantly, we must suppose, the hours had passed, for as he rides homewards to-day John West has

decided to ask in due form for the hand of Lady Emily, and, so true a prophetess is his future mother-in-law, to ask it in a formal letter to the duke, before again encountering his lady. Now it may be that there have been true lovers who adopted this method of declaring their passion, but it must usually be concluded that a gentleman who writes to a fair one's father, even be that father a duke, before he has poured his petition into the fair one's ear, is a little too formal if not too secure to be very fervent. In the case of John West at any rate this conclusion is warrantable. No fervour characterizes his feeling for Lady Emily, and he is quite sure that she will accept him. Nevertheless he feels, if not fervid, yet well pleased with himself and his matrimonial prospect as he rides home on this fine November day, that is waning into moonlit evening. His baro-

meter was like to stand at 'change' for some time to come; his quiet life of the two years past in any case seemed ending; when would he find a better opportunity for making yet another change in his condition—a change which it was clearly his duty to make some day?'

Much as he loves Swardham, he feels that, in the cultivation of honourable ambition, meet for the lord of such an heritage, Swardham may not claim all his days for all his life. And if he is called up to London by parliamentary duties, he will especially need a partner to assist him in maintaining the family dignity in the big brazen metropolis. His mother is still, in his estimation, peerless among women; but she is ageing—he could not drag her from her loved home up to town, nay, he feels that it would be a relief to her, even at home, if she could resign into worthy

hands some of the tasks that fall to the mistress of a great house, and lady bountiful of a wide estate. She has been of late scarcely in her wonted health and spirits, but her son hopes to tell her news in a day or two, which will fill her with content, and dispel ailments and anxieties. He has not a doubt but that the Lady Emily is one who will grace the position which he offers her. High-born, high-bred, composed, dignified, handsome, all these epithets are her due, and what more could be sought in a bride even by West of Swardham? He pictures to himself that fair stately presence installed at the head of his table, or supporting the renown of the house on any possible great occasion; but he never thinks of her as the sharer of his cares or sorrows, the maker of his every-day domestic peace! The one woman whom he has known intimately (the only one

except little Polly Holbrooke, and she is but a child !) is his mother, and she, though she knows well how to bear herself in seasons of state and ceremony, is so tender of heart, so truly domestic, that he takes it for granted that the atmosphere which she diffuses is natural to every place where an English lady makes her home ; nor does he pause to analyse the constituents of that atmosphere, and ask himself whether it is equally likely to be breathed around such a union as he contemplates. As to love ! John West shrugs his shoulders, he can't fancy himself ever falling into that idiotic snare, even were no suitable wife ready to hand at Marloes. Mutual esteem and liking, perfect suitability in position, and so on, these he thinks are much more likely factors of wedded prosperity than the fleeting delusive love which poets and fools rave about. There was old Lord Fitz-Raymond's

eldest daughter, a belle and beauty ten years ago; she had committed the folly of a love-match, running away with her penniless cousin in the army, and a sad mess they made of it! Separated five years back, after a career of debt and quarrels, and now, *he* has disappeared in ruin and disgrace, no one knows where or with whom, and *she* is the fastest and flightiest of English wanderers from one to another of the gayer resorts of the continent. Shaking his head scornfully John West settles his horse into a slinging trot, and is soon at his own lodge gate, where an eager curtseying woman pours into his ears a tale which quickly scatters his complacent musings for the rest of the evening, and sends him galloping up the avenue with an anxious throbbing at his heart, such as could be roused there by no proceeding on the part of Lady Emily Woodvil.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEPUTATION.

HOCKERILL'S big barn is so crammed on this wintry evening with a crowd, mostly of corduroy-clad labourers, that it is lucky indeed that its crazy frame-work, its gaping boards and weather-beaten thatch, admit an abundance of the keen outer air. The arrangements for the reception of the deputation from 'the Longborough Association for the assertion of the Rights of Man,' have been of the simplest. The barn being unused by its owner, there has been no great need of clearing it for its unwonted guests, but a bench or two has

been set out, and from the cross-beams hang two hoops of wood, each bearing a few tallow candles set in rude tin sockets, whence foul gutterings are sprinkled, as the lights flare in fifty cross draughts, upon the stolid rustics standing closely packed beneath. At the upper end of the long building is an old waggon, its broadside turned towards the faces of the crowd, and from this waggon, as from a dais or platform, the orators are to launch their eloquence. There are but five men who occupy this post of pre-eminence, and of these two only, the brothers Hockerill, are known to Swardham. They are tall hard-featured men, who have scarcely reached middle life, and the maltster, who is the elder and the owner of the barn, has introduced the deputation in a short speech. Had there been found among those rustic hearers, to whose presence in such con-

siderable numbers Hockerill had referred with pardonable pride, a few more cultured spirits or quicker brains, some little tribute of applause might surely have been rendered at the close of a speech which was in truth terse, to the point, and well delivered. But the Hockerills were but new-comers in Swardham, where twenty years' residence at least was required of any settler before he could be admitted to be on a par with the natives. Jacob Hockerill might or might not be making money in his malting business, which he managed after a fashion condemned in Swardham as new-fangled. There might or might not be disinterested zeal in his advocacy of the rights of the oppressed peasant, his importation of Longborough talent, his finding house-room and dips for the present meeting. Time would show; meanwhile the village sages had no objection to honour the

barn with their presence on a November evening, when field-work and farm-work had been too slack, owing to the season, for any one to be very tired. And where the sages went followed the ignoble herd, till the big barn overflowed. But as to applauding a Hockerill, let his words be ever so telling, as to clapping horny palms together, or uttering some husky parody on the parliamentary 'hear, hear,' it was unheard of. Such honours were not for maltsters or wheelwrights, prophets without honour in their own country. So there was a leaden and depressing silence as Jacob Hockerill perorated with a really spirited little appeal to the sterling manhood and intelligence of a Longshire labouring man, and sat him down on the head-rail of his waggon, after introducing Mr. Abel Barnett as the next speaker. Some boys, injuriously denied standing-

room within, were whooping and whistling round the door and outside the barn; some old men in the front ranks were noisily clearing their throats and other air-ducts; somebody behind indulged in a lengthy and most undisguised yawn, ending in a groan. Jacob Hockerill, though he had told himself that he expected nothing, felt as he pressed his uneasy support, that the intelligence of Longshire was scarcely up to its average in Swardham, and began to have qualms as to the success of the long-promised deputation. If his own brief well-considered speech had fallen so flat, what should be the fate of longer-winded successors? But the maltster need have suffered from no such fears, for Abel Barnett is already on his legs. Nothing daunts him, nothing damps him; he has gauged his auditors, and in ten seconds will create the bond of sympathy which has been

wanting as yet. Barnett is a short sturdy man, with a bushy fringe of grizzled hair around a bald shining poll, and an enormous flexible mouth, stretched just now by a good-humoured grin.

'How many of ye kapes a peg?' he began in the broadest Longshire dialect, and in tones of thrilling solemnity. Twice amid the pause succeeding this unexpected beginning did he repeat his question, 'How many of ye kapes a peg?' and after the third repetition there was a slight stir among the rustics and even a rumble of low laughter. Then, discarding the patois, the speaker dashed into a lively but practical disquisition on pig-keeping, in which he made it plain to the slow bucolic mind that he had studied his subject, and could give many a wrinkle to those most skilled among them in matters porcine. Not five minutes in all did Barnett waste

in this trifling, and before the end of that time he had the ear of every man in that barn. So sound an authority on bacon live and dead could scarcely fail to have valuable ideas on other subjects, and Swardham listened with profound and pleased attention, while Barnett led them to the topics on which it was his aim to enlighten them. Why hadn't every man-jack of them his pig, and ground to grow pig's victuals after serving all his children and his missis? Why hadn't every pig a good stye, and every pig's master a house as much better than the stye as the man is better than the swine?

'I'll tell you for why,' shouted Mr. Barnett, and his voice was now as thunder, 'because you don't put head to head, and hand to hand, to right yourselves! What's the stream that turns your mill? Why it's a lot of water, millions and billions of drops

of water all joined into one strong current, till the heavy wheel goes round, and the grist fills the hopper. But supposing each one of those billions of drops was perverse enough to fly off or hang back and separate from the rest, so that they came spattering against the wheel, one here, one there, like a smart shower of rain, a precious lot of grist your miller would grind, wouldn't he? a precious holiday that old wheel would have! Well, friends, you've been like those drops so far, there are thousands and thousands of you, all over this land, but what power have you to help yourselves? you do plenty for others, for the few rich and great, for the squires and parsons who rule all the roost; but who minds you if you grumble, any more than I mind a splash of rain? But join together, stick together, pull together, and there isn't a mill-race can turn a wheel faster than you'll turn out the old

abuses, turn yourselves into respected and self-respecting freemen, turn your homes into places fit for freemen to inhabit, turn the deaf ears of your old masters into fair and civil attention to all just demands! I tell you there is the power in you to do all this, if you'll only pull together to use it, and your squires and parsons could no more keep you down than they could swim against the mill-race.'

Rapidly then, but lucidly, Barnett went on to sketch the probable consequences of such movements as have since become sufficiently familiar to old England in the action of the agricultural labourers' union. He showed the simplicity of the machinery which was to work out such great effects. He prophesied the absolute certainty of success which would reward such organizations.

'From small gains and small concessions

you'll work on to great, or your children will,' he cried; 'better wages and better houses and gardens first, then the franchise, a vote for every worthy head of a house, voting by ballot too, without fear or favour; then repeal of the Game Laws, right to destroy every beast and bird that is a plague to the poor man's industry; then fair terms for every tenant of land, great or small, no more holding at will, no more shameful pocketing by the squire of the fruits of a poor man's toil, that has taught the wilderness to stand thick with corn; then, who knows? a grant to those who will make use of it of all the idle land wasted in this teeming island, on parks and pleasure-grounds and coverts for the idle rich, who might just as well idle and hunt and shoot in North America or Norway, where there isn't a man to ten square miles. This is a great work, and

a long work it will be, for it means that laws must be changed, laws that have stood long and seem interwoven into the life of the people, as these land-laws seem. And in the doing, somebody must be made very uncomfortable, that's clear—the squires, I doubt, and the farmers, maybe, and you labourers that are the men to set it a going, yes, likelier than not; but are you to sit still and rub on in the old rotten groove for fear of somebody being upset, for fear of being made to suffer for a while yourselves? Not if I know the Longshire chaps. We want no violence, leave that to the French; but unless the farmers feel what trouble is from you, their right hands, when some fine day the hand refuses to grip the plough for them, they'll never see that it's *you* and not the landlords that are their natural allies, instead of their natural enemies. There's a blessing comes

to those who help themselves, and I want you to earn it.'

In a few concluding sentences Barnett urged his hearers to join the new union society lately started in some Longshire parishes by the efforts of himself and brotherhood, of which he read the rules, and then, mopping his forehead, which smoked in spite of the cutting draughts, sat down amid a storm of hoarse murmurs of approbation, of rattling of old men's staves, and thumping of broad hob-nailed soles. He had roused, he had impressed his stolid audience, and alas for the rector and his vaunts! he had sown germs which would never be purged away from Swardham, last stronghold as it may have been of feudal loyalty to its lords.

Jacob Hockerill is on his legs again, in capital spirits this time. Time being short he will merely say that Mr. Van Lennep of

Longborough will now address a few words to the meeting, and Mr. Van Lennep accordingly advances to the front of the wain which served for rostrum. He is a young man of slight make and puny figure, with regular but rather insignificant features and a very receding chin. His pale reddish hair is brushed up from his forehead into a peak, not unlike a lambent flame, and though he wears little or no whisker, there sprouts below his chin a tuft, as though designed to correspond with or balance the peak before mentioned. From the opaque pallor of his face he seems a town-bred man, and the same impression is conveyed by his shiny frock-coat and smart blue scarf, wherein a golden pin is stuck; and by the gloves and thin-soled boots which cover his hands and feet, of the smallness of which he is disposed to be vain. Altogether, what with his outlandish name

and his appearance, Swardham is not favourably prepossessed. Barnett was the speaker! and Barnett wore a rough suit of hodden grey, and had huge red hands that had stuck many a pig, no doubt and lifted many a stone-weight. This young man was evidently nervous too, so Swardham settled itself down to be critical, all the more for having been betrayed into emotion by the last speaker. Van Lennep had a high-pitched voice, and in his nervousness committed the mistake of speaking much too fast for the slow comprehension of his hearers. It was not nervousness, however, but a habitual ambition which led him to a choice of words and epithets quite beyond the rustic understanding, even if they had been allowed to filter slowly through the rustic ear. The new speaker gloried in poly-syllables, and was unconcealedly mortified

when some brief unmanageable Saxon noun escaped him before he could hit on an imposing synonym. But the sages of the village could make out that this slim-built stranger was quite a terrible fellow, as far as sentiments went. Nothing would content him short of 'impeaching' and 'arraigning' all the powers that be. First he demolished and smashed the Established Church, tithes, glebes, and all; and not content with general denunciations, must needs challenge by name the rector of Swardham to appear and answer for his sins. What was it but his tithes that made rents high, farmers stingy, wages low? and these tithes he went on to prove to be national property, national provision for the poor, on which lazy priests had too long battened.

Poor Mr. Holbrooke had been, for thirty years past, the kind friend of every soul

in that audience, but somehow it excited no indignation—no, not among those who had drunk his wine and soup for weeks together in sickness—that he should be branded as a robber and 'battener,' whatever that might mean. It was new and startling, but there might be something in it, though it *was* the utterance of a whipper-snapper chap in a whimsy blue neck-cloth. Having rolled the Establishment in the dust, and trampled Mr. Holbrooke in particular beneath the heel of fiery contempt, the orator went on to tear down other idols, and denounce the landed gentry and hereditary peerage as locusts, as running sores and plague-spots. By this time he had got over his nervousness, and having clearly read up his facts in some county history or gazetteer, he began dealing tremendous vengeance among the local grandees. The FitzRaymonds indeed had bought their

property—but how? a mercenary lawyer gorged with bribes and fees, had finally invested his hoards in broad acres, in order to oppress his tenantry as he had oppressed his suitors. But to the Wests belonged no such shadow of rightful acquisition of their broader domains. The hireling varlet of a successful freebooter—such had been the first West who came into Longshire, his prowess in robbery and murder rewarded with a stolen estate! Since this creditable beginning, again and again had the Wests swelled their rent-roll, sometimes by marriages, but often by fresh grants of Crown lands.

'Now, my friends and countrymen,' he cried, 'what are these Crown lands that have gone to pamper the Wests and a hundred such families? They are, as they always were by rights, national property, *your* property! Weak or rascally princes

had no more right to give them away than your parson would have to give your church to the squire to keep his hunters in! If all the squandered Crown lands were now to the fore, they would produce a yearly income such that taxation would be all but unknown, even for the needs of present wasteful governments! and that, while finding a holding for every man capable of tilling it. I am no romancer! I dare your squire to give me the lie! I challenge him to disprove my assertions as to the origin of his family estates—as to the common land that has been stolen from *you!* I call him to account for the sins of himself and his fathers in their lust of adding field to field—in grinding the faces of the poor, whose right it is to live by the land they till.'

As, with much gesticulation, the frenzied orator poured forth this series of impeach-

ments, he might, if less engrossed, have noticed a strange and sudden movement in the crowd. There was a rustling, a crouching and cowering away to the sides of the barn, such as may be seen among a flock of sheep when the shepherd's dog trots through their ranks in the fold-yard. At last the front row, mainly consisting of elders seated on a form, was suddenly agitated, men rose abruptly with shuffling feet, and strove to move crab-wise aside. The bench was upset, and at the noise Van Lennep ceased to speak and turned his eyes in consternation on a figure that had emerged from the ruck, and now stood close by the waggon wheel, confronting him with haughty brow and gleaming eye and sinewy frame, erect, powerful, and menacing. For an instant they gazed upon each other, the one in his cheap finery open-mouthed, dismayed, shrinking, paler than his pale

wont, the other resolute, disdainful, a stalwart Hercules in well-cut evening clothes and all the seemliness of fine linen and varnished boots. Then, stepping lightly up upon the nave of the wheel, John West caught the luckless orator by the collar of his frock-coat, and swung him with both hands, as though he had been a mere dummy or bag of clothes, over the side of the waggon, till, springing from the wheel, he could set him on his feet upon the earthen floor. Then, without quickened breath or raised voice, he said, as he towered over the terrified man—

'Here I am at your side to answer, let's have it all over again.'

But from those white lips, late so valiant, came now no syllable in reply, only the voices of Barnett and Hockerill were to be heard.

'Have a care, sir, how you lay a finger on one of us!'

'For God's sake, Mr. West, sir, respect the liberty of the subject, and the right of public meeting, sir!'

Deigning no reply to these remonstrances, nor even glancing at the party who now swarmed over the waggon-side and hastened to support the almost fainting form of their friend, John West faced the abashed audience, and sternly took them to task for that he found them in such company.

'Were there not fools in plenty, such as you are to-night, knaves such as this fellow could not thrive! Look at him, has he ever done an honest day's work? He prates of toilers and their rights, but what does he know of toil? These are the fellows who would come uppermost if you and all fools like you should be bitten with madness stark enough to do their bidding. And I for one should wish you joy of your new masters. See how

his mouthings and frothings are silenced when a man stands out ready to answer him—not that I would lay a rough hand on the fellow, but because lies always skulk! Doubtless he has promised you fine things, if you will be catspaws for him—well, if you give ear to him, and do as he bids, when you want something for your burnt fingers, where will his promises be? Vanished away like his charges against me and mine, that he piled up behind my back, but can't bring before my face. Pah! I won't talk about him. Go home, you honest asses, and I hope your wives, who have had the sense to keep away to-night, will trounce you well when they get hold of you, and bring you to your better minds.'

Without a second glance at his vanquished and overwhelmed antagonist, or his muttering and angered supporters, John

West strode down the barn again, the hinds shambling bashfully out of his path, and tugging at their forelocks the while. His last words had been full of his usual good-humour, and the relieved rustics noted that not so much as a leaf of the hot-house flower he wore in his coat was rumpled by the late affray. The young squire, like a good fellow as he was (and lord! as stout as a bullock), wasn't going to remember it agin them after all; but in spite of these hopes of amnesty, there was one consent in an immediate and unceremonious rush from the barn. In vain did Hockerill, in vain did stentorian Barnett implore, command, taunt the retreating assemblage; there was never a chance for the vote of indignation which they of the rostrum were burning to propose and carry. Pell-mell, helter-skelter, every pair of hob-nailed boots made for the door, and before

Van Lennep had recovered a semblance of composure, the guttering candles revealed only vacancy, save where the little group of five stood together by the forsaken waggon.

'Never mind, Dolf; he'd have been just as overtook himself if that great arbitrary swell had pounced on him as he did on you, doing it so beautiful as you were too.'

Such was the consolation offered to Van Lennep as he returned later in a hired fly to Longborough. Barnett had remained at Jacob Hockerill's for the night; but no offer of similar hospitality had been made to poor Van Lennep. In his disconsolate retreat, however, he had the society of his Achates, the third person, the *persona muta*, of the deputation, one Harry Soole, to whom his friend Dolf van Lennep was still and always a model, regarded with

constant veneration, and who was ever content to act as chorus to his friend and pattern.

'I'll have the law on him,' quoth Dolf, too irate to be grammatical; 'the bloated oppressor shall rue the day when he laid his hand upon me, taking me at a gross disadvantage too. Such were the landed classes who provoked the French Revolution; let this fellow West beware!'

Harry did not in his inmost heart believe that much success would attend on an action for assault and battery against the young squire, should his friend thus seek vengeance for his wrongs, but none the less did he dutifully echo his admired Dolf's fulminations, and though he was more than once roundly snubbed for his pains, succeeded to some extent in soothing the other's exasperation before, cold and weary, they alighted in Longborough town.

CHAPTER VI.

MADAM SENDS FOR THE RECTOR.

THERE was trouble and anxiety in Swardham this year as Christmas approached. In that primitive village community the glad season was not wont to be marred by meagre fare or scanty firing, or lack of seasonable garments, nor indeed was the usual supply of creature comforts, showered from hall and rectory upon all who needed them, in any wise stinted this year. But the dole was not on this occasion received from the familiar hand, or accompanied by the kindly words which for years past had enhanced it to the village

poor. Little Miss Mary at the rectory was indeed as good as gold, and Mrs. Lavender much respected for one who hadn't been housekeeper at the hall above eight or nine year. The cloaks, the coals, the beef, the rabbits, the hosiery, the tea and tobacco were all of the accustomed quantity and quality, but every one was missing Madam West, and no one, nothing could make up for the want of her active presence. It should by rights have been a time of extra festivity, for was not the young squire about to wed a lady wife? and all Swardham knew how the squire's mother would rejoice to welcome a worthy daughter-in-law to the old hall; and yet not even for the oldest pensioner was there sight or speech of madam.

'Eh dear a dear! it isn't like Christmas at all,' sighed many an ancient widow woman, as reluctantly she would depart

without the greeting, the smile, the kind inquiries after her family, which she had expected not less than her dole of flannel or provisions.

It could not be, said village gossip, that madam was merely ill. Sadly enough she was reported to be looking by her servants, but she would have no doctor nigh her, and could not be got to speak of her health, although she ate little and slept less. But if not ill in body, what could have come to Madam West? Forgetting all her usual occupations, hastily committing to subordinates her charities, she shunned, as far as possible, the company of every living being, and brooded alone in her own small sitting-room, which opened from her bed-chamber. There her faithful maid, lurking perplexed and disconsolate in the adjoining room, could hear her, hour after hour, pacing to and fro. There was a picture hung in this

sitting-room, a family group painted more than forty years before, in which Madam West figured as a rosy handsome young woman, one arm resting on her father's shoulder, the other stretched to a leaping setter. The scene had been laid in the flower-garden of the hall, and by the father's side upon the same carved stone bench sat the mother, fair-haired and delicate, with roses on her lap. At the feet of his parents the elder son was stretched upon the grass, pulling the ears of another favourite dog, and reproducing in his dark animated features and stalwart limbs the image of his sire. Singularly unlike his brother was the boy who completed the group; but in his petulant pink and white face could be traced a resemblance to his mother, at whose side he leaned. There were the same pale blue eyes and light hair, the same thin well-formed nose and

retreating chin, though the expression was in the mother's case all mildness, in the son's all peevish haughtiness, a caricature of the proud resolution stamped upon his father's lineaments. Before this picture the Abigail, peeping through the half-closed door, would see her mistress pause at times and noiselessly wring her hands, or press them to her brow as though bewildered, before she began her restless walk again.

Neither the rector, her long-accustomed friend, nor her favourite Mary had been admitted to her for a fortnight past, and for the same space of time it had been all but impossible for her dependents to obtain any orders from her, except a general one, that she was to be denied to all comers of whatever degree. The old servants shook their heads and were at their wits' end. The younger and more irreverent were sure that mistress was taking on because a young

lady was coming to the hall, and began to yearn for a bride's advent to relieve the gathering dulness of the place. While such was the dismay occasioned among all ranks in Swardham by Mrs. West's altered state, how did it affect him who was nearest and dearest to her, the son linked to her by bonds of no common love?

Strange to say, John West was the only person who was unaware of any serious change in his mother; but making all allowance for the exigencies of his position as a newly-affianced swain, and a candidate for the representation of his county, it was mainly due to the exertions of Mrs. West herself that her son's peace was undisturbed by apprehension. The old servants were sharply forbidden to trouble the squire with any reference to madam's health; and every morning when her son was at home (and save in the morning he was seldom at home

just now), she nerved herself by a great effort to appear at the breakfast table, or to receive him in her own sitting-room, when he had breakfasted alone and early. For her seclusion and her wan looks she accounted, making very light of them, by declaring that she had taken a chill, and felt that her only chance of avoiding a violent cold for the winter lay in such precautions as she was taking. With these protestations she would content her son, dismissing him almost eagerly to his pleasuring at Marloes, or his hunting or canvassing engagements. And the moment his back was turned, she would retreat into herself once more, and become the worn, restless, *haunted* woman, who paced her pleasant room so wretchedly, and gazed so strangely on her girlish self and the pictured forms of the dead who surrounded her image on the brightly-tinted canvas.

But of all those in whose lives Mrs. West was a prominent object, none at this juncture were more saddened than the rector and his daughter. Mary indeed was too young not to be full of hope and capable of distraction amid all her distress at the strange eclipse which had befallen her godmother; but Mary's father felt as if hope were almost dead, nor could he think of anything else than the puzzling distressing message which forbade him from pressing his claims as an ancient friend, or relieving his anxiety by talking to the young squire. It was just a little note, written in pencil, and put for him in the vestry one Sunday.

'My kind good friend,' it ran, 'don't be alarmed if you don't see me at church to-day, or for a while—don't come and ask for me or about me—above all don't say a word to John respecting me. You shall be

the first I send for, when I send for any one. Trust me so far. My fond love to Mary—and don't let her think me unkind. God bless you both!

'R. W.'

That was all; and of course the rector obeyed, as he was always wont, and saw that his child also kept aloof from her usual haunts. But in Holbrooke's bosom there was almost rage at the blindness of the young squire, who could go his way rejoicing, courting at Marloes, hunting here and shooting there, or stumping the county anon under the retiring member's auspices, while at home things were so far wrong, and the best of mothers, the most admirable of women was, by some occult influence, struck as with a sudden paralysis, and prisoned with no companion but a secret woe. Alas for the rector's proud repudiation of such

possibilities for his revered patroness! Though he felt more than ever inflamed against the presumption of the man who had first suggested the hateful thought, it was but too plain to his affectionate scrutiny that some hidden, some grievous pressure there must be, which was blighting the calm old age of Rachel West, poisoning the religious cheerfulness which had helped her to bear many a blow, numbing the active benevolence which had for years made sunshine in the parish, and rendered its rector's work both light and blessed. Pattern and pillar of the church and its services as she had been so long, her estrangement was the more grievous and galling. Why was he there as priest of that parish, if not to comfort his flock in dark hours?

Always a diffident man, prone to distrust his own efficiency, he found himself in this sad time harping on the taunting words in

which Mr. Auchmuty had compared his influence over the souls committed to his charge with the subtler potency of the Roman priesthood. A worthier, a more spiritual, a wiser pastor would not have failed (so he told himself) to have surmounted all obstacles to perfect confidence between himself and any afflicted member of his flock, and having once attained to such confidence, to have ministered counsel and comfort. But here was he chafing in useless misery while his oldest and dearest friend suffered in solitude, unable to rely on his high office or his undoubted fidelity for one moment's respite from her woe! The poor man felt himself too old to alter his ways, which were indeed blameless enough, but he was for the first time in his life weighed down by a sense of utter inadequacy to cope with his responsibilities. All his honest pride and pleasure in his parish

was fled: he began to debate with himself whether he was justified in retaining the benefice in which his life had been spent. It would break his heart to sever the tie, but what matter if duty clearly called for the sacrifice?

Brooding in this melancholy fashion, there is no possibility of knowing to what course Mr. Holbrooke might ultimately have been impelled. Probably he might have sought an interview with John West, and interrupted his engrossing round of business and pleasure by sternly claiming his attention for home matters, and the welfare of a mother worthy of the most absorbing devotion. At such a crisis the usual softness of his tone towards the young squire would not have prevailed to the weakening of a message designed to rouse and startle him from what seemed unaccountable apathy. But while the

rector was revolving in his mind dreary thoughts and unwelcome expedients, an end came suddenly to this the most trying passage in his life as yet. He received, one snowy afternoon, a few lines from Mrs. West, in which she made good the promise contained in her first strange and oft-pondered note, and bade her old friend come to her without delay, and alone. Never did exile welcome with more gratitude the sentence of his recall; and though as yet Mary was not to resume with him her old position at the hall, the rector nothing doubted but that all would now soon revert to the old comfortable routine, and started off in altered mood ready to smile at his late depression. It was nearly a month since he had set eyes on his valued friend—the saddest month which he had ever known at Swardham since his wife was taken from him seventeen years ago.

What comfort had he then found in Rachel West's sympathy and thoughtfulness! Oh, that he might now be able, as from his heart he was eager, to console in turn, if need there were for consolation. The good man, as he hurried through the shrubberies, put up a silent prayer that counsel and help might be lent him from on high. Already, in accordance with his temperament, he was condemning as impious the doubts which had so lately beset him. Within a few minutes he was ushered into Mrs. West's little sitting-room, and stood before his friend once more, with a full heart.

'They would have it that no more than a cold ailed you,' he faltered, as he took the thin hand extended to him.

His new-born cheerfulness was sorely damped by the altered appearance of his friend. Mrs. West's large dark eyes now seemed too big for her pale and haggard

face—and under those eyes there was a darkness, and upon that face a sickliness of hue which distressed the rector beyond measure.

'How could you hide it from us, when you have been so ill?' he murmured, as he took a seat.

'My friend,' Mrs. West replied, in low but clear tones, 'it is not to talk of my ailments that I have summoned you. I am not aware that anything has ailed me indeed, further than can be accounted for by the body's sympathy with a disordered mind and distracted soul. Yes, my dear old friend, I see you start, but I am describing only too correctly my state for months past—months which have dragged like years. Tempted, tortured, conscience-pricked, racked by doubt and terror,—compelled to bear my burden alone and deceive the dear loving eyes that sought mine,—

such has been my condition, till I could bear it no longer, and have resolved to share my load with you, my tried and trusty friend, before its weight is known to all.'

In his indescribable agitation the rector could not speak, as Mrs. West paused. Two tears were already rolling down his healthy cheeks, and his throat seemed choked, but his eyes met his friend's gaze, and she could read in them loving loyalty that surpassed all words.

'You never saw my brother Adolphus?' she resumed presently.

The rector shook his head, and his eyes travelled to the picture, where the fair-haired, disdainful lad stood at his mother's side.

At the time of Mr. Holbrooke's coming to Swardham rectory his patron's younger son had been dead some six months, but he was not ignorant of the young man's career of dissipation and disgrace.

'You have heard,' Mrs. West went on, 'that he died and was buried away from home. I nursed him for a whole month before his death, in a mean lodging near the Gray's Inn Road. Poor, erring fellow! he was our mother's darling, and well it was for her that she was spared the knowledge of his evil-doing and his end. "May God so deal by you, my Rachel, and your children to come, as you deal with my sweet boy," those were the last words she spoke to me. It was not much that could be done for him when at last he sent me word of the retreat in which he had hidden himself. It was plain that he was doomed; but at least he had one of his own blood to tend him to the last, and my poor husband's generosity provided everything that he might fancy. The very first night I sat with him, he astonished me with the news that he was a married man—married

five months before to a girl who had waited on him at a Wiltshire village where he had stayed when rusticated from Oxford. My first words, as soon as I recovered from my surprise and distress, were urgent that he should send for his wife at once, but he would not hear of it. "Tilly's presence would be anything but a comfort or pleasure to me just now," he said, in his light way. "I don't want to be told that my 'ands are 'ot, or to hear a lot of snivelling when I am a bit cross. Besides, the poor creature has a trouble of her own coming, so she tells me, and must take care of her precious health." It was plain to me that his fancy for the girl had already passed away, and when I spoke of his duty and her rights, he positively refused to give me her address, declaring that she was "best as she was, with the artful old slut of an aunt who had let him in for his matrimonial honours." It

was not till the last week that he would believe himself to be dying, and if less flippant, he became bitterer towards some for whom he should have had far other feelings. Of our father especially he spoke in a manner most painful to me, and declared often that, if widow or child survived him, he would prefer their starving to their acceptance of any pittance from the squire. And the morning before he died he exacted from me a promise that I would never betray his confidences to my father, or reveal to any one except my husband the existence of the young widow, who, as he assured me, was as ignorant of the position of her husband's family as she was unfitted to take a place among its members. This promise I have kept up to this day, and am the only living person who knows that my father's younger son left a widow, and that there was posthumous issue of their

clandestine marriage. By Mr. Woodvil's kindness I was enabled, immediately after my brother's funeral, to journey down into Wiltshire and break to the unfortunate girl the news of her bereavement. I had found some letters among my brother's papers which gave me the necessary address—ill-spelt, ill-expressed letters they were, so filled with selfish repining and unreasonable regrets that I ceased to wonder at my brother's coldness, though I felt that no effort must be lacking on my part to spare the unhappy girl as much as possible. I need not dwell on my reception in the Wiltshire cottage, nor on the arrangements which, thanks to my husband, I made with the aunt for the niece's maintenance. It is enough to mention that I undeceived neither, when, in their selfish lamentations, they alluded to Adolphus as a man without fortune or expectations from any relative,

unless it might be from my husband or myself, and loudly bewailed the rashness which had committed a girl so attractive as Matilda to so unprofitable a union. Thankful indeed was I that I was bound by a solemn promise to conceal from my family their connection with such people, whose coarse vulgarity of soul and absence of all better feeling had thoroughly revolted me during a stay which was made as short as possible. In due time I was informed by the aunt of the birth of twins, a boy and girl, to my brother's widow, and was disposed to echo her comment that, as they were but weakly, it was hoped that the Lord might see fit to take one or both. A hint which was added that, in that case, her niece might yet hope to do well in marriage, half prepared me for a communication which reached me six months later. It was from a man, a stranger, and apparently what

would be called a character, who informed me that he purposed making Matilda West his wife as soon as her year of widowhood should have expired. But you shall read his letter for yourself—I have it here.'

The rector took from Mrs. West's hand a sheet covered with queer, foreign-looking writing, and read aloud as follows:

'*George St., Birmingham,*
'*October* 2, 18—.

'MADAM,

'I intended making Matilda Smith my wife before her aunt led her into the mistake of marrying with your late brother. Suffering as she does in consequence of that mistake, I still repeat my offer, and she is wise enough to close with it. But I have made these conditions, that it is to be as if the mistake had never been. Together with the name, every link, every remembrance,

every stiver arising of her former marriage must pass away from her for ever. To this you are not likely to object—but you will say, what of the children? Madam, it is my belief that neither of those babes can live to enter their second year—that the boy especially will scarcely live till I become his step-father. Very good. I sorrow not. They are fruits of a mistake. But if either or both should, in spite of present appearances, survive infancy, I, being a man who have a good trade and am a clever craftsman, definitely undertake the maintenance until adolescence of such child or children, provided that he, she, or they are suffered to grow up in ignorance of their true paternity; and engage to treat him, her, or them in all respects as I would mine own. To these conditions Matilda assents. If you dissent there is one sole alternative—*you* can at once adopt the children of your

brother, but no half-and-half course is possible. My wife must be mine only, and beholden to none but

(Signed) 'Erasmus van Lennep.'

As the rector finished this blunt and straightforward epistle a soiled piece of paper slipped from between its leaves, and Mrs. West bade him read it also. It was dated three days later than the other letter, and was almost illegible, but Mr. Holbrooke made out that the tremulous signature was that of Matilda West, and that the scrawling lines related incoherently the decease of the writer's 'darling baby' in convulsions, at half past two that morning. Further reference was made to a wedding which must be postponed in consequence of the sad event, and to the precarious state of the surviving infant. As these papers were handed back to Mrs. West, she went on

in the same low but clear and monotonous tone with her recital.

'Beyond a brief notice of the marriage, which took place just fourteen months after my brother's death, I never had another line from these people—I could not say for certain if they were still alive. Soon after that time I had much trouble of my own—and coming back to my old home a widow began the long term of quiet and peace which, save for my elder brother's disastrous death, was unbroken while my dear father lived. So seldom during these happy years did my mind recur to the events of which I have told you, that I forgot them for long periods together. Indeed, even the whole of my married life, the three years which alone I lived away from this house, has seemed to me almost as a dream at times, with all its incidents of bliss and woe, so contrasted with my

calm, uneventful course beneath this roof. At length, in extreme old age, as you know well, my father passed away, happy in the belief that his estate would descend to a grandson who, though not born a West, had grown up beneath his eye, and re-produced his excellencies. My dear friend,—you are acquainted with our affairs,—were the terms of my father's will known accurately to you?'

'Except a general knowledge that your son took the estate under the will, as everybody expected and foreknew, absolutely and unreservedly, I can't recall anything as to its terms. It was all so regular and in course that John should succeed the squire, that I don't know that any one talked about the details.'

So spake the bewildered rector, and was all attention as Mrs. West once more, with the same forced calmness, resumed her say.

'I can tell you, however, the details. My father had a great horror of will-making, and never altered, except by an unimportant codicil or two, a will made just after my mother's death, in which he had devised the estate first to my brother John, or his heirs male absolutely; next, failing heirs male of John, to Adolphus and his heirs male absolutely; lastly, failing heirs male of Adolphus, to me, or to my eldest son, if I should have a son of age, at the death of the testator. Having long outlived his two sons, both of whom he believed to have died unmarried, my father did not consider it necessary to make any alteration in this will, which secured the succession to my son in a manner quite satisfactory to him—yes, satisfactory to all but me; and why can I not die in silence? why am I compelled to ruin the son of my love?'

Here the unhappy lady's voice rose

almost to a shriek, as she sprang from her chair, and, standing with her clasped hands and streaming eyes before the picture, moaned out piteously,

'Oh, mother! mother! God so deal with me and mine, you said, as I should deal by your darling. Oh! what have I done? what must I do? Ah me! would that I had died before my father!—died innocent and happy with my hand in his, and my head on my boy's breast!—gone to meet a mother's unreproaching spirit, and feel her sweet welcome on the other side the veil.'

Sinking upon her knees, this woman, of old so calm and stately, was bowed as a reed under her uncontrollable misery. Her face indeed was hidden as she grovelled upon the sofa at which she knelt, but a braid of her white hair escaped from beneath her cap, and fell forlornly on her shivering shoulders. On God's earth could

no more pitiable figure have been found than the mistress of this stately house. Nor yet on this earth could any heart have swollen nigher to bursting than did that of Francis Holbrooke to see this woeful sight.

Never yet had tale of distress failed to find a way to his tender heart; and at this moment if by shedding his heart's blood he could have shortened this woman's agony, he would not have held the sacrifice too dear. Softly, yet breathing hard, he knelt beside his friend, and from his oppressed soul there welled a simple yet noble prayer to God for pity and guidance. Before the last faltering word was uttered the agonizing sobs, the almost frantic words were hushed, and Rachel West lay prostrate, but meek in her grievous humiliation, while into the rector's heart a ray of hope darted, where all had been gloom and terror since he suspected the drift of his friend's revela-

tion; and as he raised her by the hand, and seated her on the sofa, he was able to say almost cheerfully,

'Thank God for this, that you shall no longer bear your trouble alone. Let us face it calmly together, and—who knows?—it may turn out no more than a dark shadow after all.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE UPHEAVAL BEGINS.

'YOU told me,' said the rector, soothingly, after a while, 'that no communication has passed between your brother's widow and yourself since her marriage, at which time one of her twin children (but whether the boy or the girl is not specified) had already died. See then how many chances there are against the one possibility which has distressed you so infinitely! The second child may have gone the way of the first, or if otherwise, the survival of the girl would in no way affect the young squire's position.'

A shuddering groan escaped from Mrs. West when she heard her secret terror take shape in words, even though these were chosen expressly to give no shock.

'I had taught myself to think so,' she said despondently at last. 'I had almost taught myself to believe that if—if otherwise, I could do no wrong in holding my peace, and allowing my father's testament to take such effect as he designed it should take. But it was not the will of God. He would not let me deceive myself into happiness. I am as sure that my brother's son is a living man as I am that you sit here by me!'

Her frame shook as with a palsy while she pronounced, to her hearer's dismay, these decisive words, but her voice grew steadier, and she went on,—

'You may remember that nearly two years back, very soon, that is, after my

father's death, I went to stay with my old friend Anna Murray and her husband, the Vicar of St. Mary's, in Longborough. I thought that a stay in that house among such good and devoted people would keep me from selfishness in my grief. Alas! I little knew how long a farewell I was to bid there to peace! Among the sick whom the vicar was then visiting was a man whose eccentricity and originality made a considerable impression on him, and he would speak to his wife and to me of the startling sentiments and daring conceits which he heard from this person, a watchmaker of Dutch extraction, and an advanced radical, indeed, a Chartist and free-thinker to boot, who had settled in his parish some years before, and was now succumbing to an incurable disease. Ah! my friend, you will have guessed already that this man was the Erasmus Van Lennep who married

Matilda West, and brought her many years after into Longshire, as ignorant as she of her first husband's connection with the county. From the moment when I heard the man's name I was a changed being. I dared confide nothing to the Murrays; I could not even venture to ask questions as to Van Lennep's family, but I secured their address from Mr. Murray's note-book, and found my way alone to the street in which they lived. Though I had armed myself with an errand, carrying a watch which needed repair, I could not bring myself to enter the house, veiled as I was, and changed beyond possibility of recognition by Matilda should I encounter her. After walking once or twice past the house on the other side of the way I entered a little stationer's shop, and making a small purchase, asked the woman who served me for a glass of water, as I, truly enough, felt faint and

unwell. The woman, a civil, talkative person, insisted on my taking a chair in her back parlour, and proved, as I had hoped, both able and willing to gossip about her neighbours upon the slightest encouragement. From her I soon learned that the Van Lenneps were people who had, as it was thought, come down in the world, having formerly had a good business at Birmingham, and that the family consisted of the sick man, his wife, and an only son known as Dolf, and "somewhere getting on for thirty." When I heard that name and the description of the young man's age, I felt that my doom was sealed, and did not need the further confirmation afforded by the woman's description of his person. From that hour it has been ever before me that it is my duty to snatch from my son his place in the world,—the place for which he was reared up, and which he

fills so well,—and to see my boy replaced, by the son of my brother's unacknowledged union. I have longed, yes, I have even dared to pray that I might die suddenly—die and have made no sign. Sometimes I have told myself that I do no wrong to this young man by depriving him of that to which accident alone has given him a claim, to which he has never raised an eye, a hope, or thought. I have even resolved, when such sophistries failed to quiet my conscience, to bear the guilt unflinchingly, and live out my days a cheat, till I pass to a just God's recompense. But it has been borne in upon me that, so doing, I might bring a curse upon my noble and innocent son, and his children to come, whether or no detection of his mother's fraud should follow. Better resign all at once, with clean hands, than risk a stain on that stainless honour! Again, picture

to yourself, my friend, the feelings with which I learned, a few weeks since, that fate had brought the so-called Dolf Van Lennep to this very place, had even produced a collision between the cousins, unconscious of their relationship or of the complication which involves them! What I have suffered since that terrible day no tongue can tell; but I am conquered, beaten to my knees at last! and terrible, heartrending as is the task before me, it must be done without delay. And you, my friend, must help me. When I think of my son, and the blow that I must deal to him,—my idol, the sun and centre of my life and bliss,—I feel that it will kill me; but you must help me to be just in spite of all my fears.'

Her voice died away in sorrow too deep for tears, and her head drooped wearily forward as the rector, almost in a whisper, said,

'What you bid me shall be done, but God help us all!'

'You will go then to-morrow to Longborough—I will give you the address—and see these people. Convince yourself if you will (I am convinced, and feel it can be but an idle formality) of the identity of this young man with my nephew, prepare him and his mother for what is coming to them, and bring them both—or him at least—back with you, if they will come. I shall have atonement to make for the injustice already done, and when they see their heritage, their gain, my loss, they will be less hard perhaps on me and my boy. Ah, my boy, my love, my pride—' With a sudden wail she broke off, and sinking back in her seat, buried her ashen face in her hands.

For a time there was silence in the room, but at last the rector found voice enough for a few hesitating words.

'Surely these people, this young man, if the blood of the Wests really flows in his veins, cannot be hard enough, grasping enough to take full advantage of what you mean to disclose! Some compromise would surely meet the justice of the case. Five hundred a year, a thousand a year, anything in reason! It would be affluence to them, and they may well be too wise to covet a position for which they cannot be fit. Cheer up then, my dear good friend, ever loved and honoured, and tell me that I may hope for some arrangement which shall avert a catastrophe.'

Without again raising herself Mrs. West feebly shook her head, and in broken tones murmured,

'You must not tempt me! that and every other possible expedient has again and again occurred to me. But it cannot be! I have no hope of anything less than

absolute deprivation, ruin, and beggary for my boy. And if there were no other objection, how could I carry out any such scheme without my son's knowledge, without making him my accomplice? and, my friend, in all my woe I rejoice to think that he would recoil with horror from buying any worldly good at the price of honour. Above his bride, above his every ambition, his stainless honour stands, and shall stand. No; I know your heart, I know that it is bleeding for us; but you must say no more. Leave me now, and to-morrow I shall see you on your return from Longborough. To-morrow the worst shall be known to all who are concerned. Pray for me that I may have strength for that bitterest hour! pray for my son, that he may never forget his noble nature under this great adversity—and now good-bye!'

A long clasp of the hand, a hoarsely-

muttered blessing, and Holbrooke passes from the room, from the house, and, stunned and confused, begins his homeward walk. The wide park is peaceful in the wintry twilight. Rooks are cawing sleepily from the bare branching elms; the fallow deer crouch snugly among the withered brackens. Can all nature be keeping her wonted order so placidly? and can it yet be true, this hideous story? Fire, flood, axe, storm,—all might do their worst upon this calm scene, and yet what would the havoc be compared with the desolation about to fall upon it? The gallant, chivalrous man, in the early prime of his life and the first flush of his honourable ambition, the saintly and revered woman, who from youth to age had been the ornament and good genius of the ancestral home,—these are but intruders, soon to be outcasts; and in their place (oh, can providence be slumbering?) shall step

one, not merely meanly reared, but a sworn enemy to the class among which fate's irony is soon to number him—a demagogue, a Chartist, a foe to all that the lords of Swardham had cherished for generations.

It was a relief to Mr. Holbrooke, on reaching the rectory, to find a gay, apologetic note from his daughter, who had been enticed away to spend the evening at the parsonage in a neighbouring village, where, amid a crowd of merry boys and girls, she was certain to be detained till a late hour. He could not face Mary without exciting her alarm in his present over-wrought and miserable mood, and determined to be off in the morning before she should be stirring. Poor girl! it was well that she should enjoy one more happy evening before she too should be crushed in the ruin which was hanging over the place lately so blissful. The unhappy rector stamped his foot in

impotent wrath as there darted suddenly through his memory the mocking prophecy of the hateful Auchmuty—'Unless the secret is one that will die with her, you will remember this little confidence of mine some day, when this Arcadia of yours is upheaved with a genuine sensation.' Alas! how soon it had come, this earthquake, where all had seemed profoundly secure, and what vestige of Arcadian joys was likely to survive its ravages! Sick at heart and dazed with sorrow, the rector crept to his room, there to count the slow hours till the night should be gone, and it was time for him to play his part in the wretched tragedy, of which the curtain was to fall on the ruin of those dearest to him, save his own child, on this fleeting earth.

CHAPTER VIII.

A VISITOR IN BRITANNIA STREET.

IN a dim little back parlour, situate in Britannia Street, Longborough, an elderly woman is fussing about a meagre breakfast-table, and glancing often at a cheap American clock, in a very red mahogany case, decorated with a very gaudy picture, supposed to represent the great Exhibition of 1851. The woman's short and dumpy figure is sparely robed in cheap black stuff, and she wears a widow's cap, between the ample borders of which her small features look insignificantly forth, though her cheeks are round and fat, and

streaked with faint pink. She heaves frequent sighs as she puts the coffee-pot within the fender, or peeps under a tin dish-cover at a haddock which is cooling beneath, and her expression is querulous, even when at last a footfall is heard in the shop, and a young man enters the room.

'Morning, mother,' says the laggard; 'breakfast's ready, I hope, because Harry is to call for me at the half-hour, and we must settle the programme for next lecture night before noon, and a dozen other things.'

'Your breakfast's been spoiling since half-past eight, when I had mine,' replies the woman in melancholy tones; 'and I *did* hope you were going to attend to your work to-day. There's Mrs. Brown's watch, that I got her to leave quite as a favour, I assure you; and that Rugg is not fit to be trusted with it. You'll surely see to that first, as I promised it by this evening, and she may

be a good customer with her large grown-up family.'

'Oh, bother the old 'ippopotamus,' says the son with his mouth full of bread and haddock; 'the idea of her patronizing me with her favours! If Rugg's no good, what do we pay him fourteen shillings a week for?'

The woman's answer comes from behind her apron, as she sinks into a chair and gives way to tears, which spring ever readily to her eyes.

'It's not much longer we shall be able to afford a journeyman at all, at this rate. And then what's to become of us? The workhouse, I suppose, for me—while you go off after your lecturing and folly that never puts a penny into your pocket. Oh dear, oh dear,'—and she cries and sniffs in a subdued and hopeless way, while her son, shrugging his shoulders, goes on silently with his breakfast.

Presently the little bell attached to the shop-door jingles, and Rugg, the unappreciated journeyman, thrusts his shock head into the room and says,

'Oh, it's young Soole called for Mister Dolf.'

'Come in, Harry,' shouts Dolf, glad to put an end to the *téte-à-téte*, while his mother, with a dolorous look and emphatic shake of the head, betakes her up-stairs to make the beds.

Dolf often snubs his Harry roundly, but there is consolation in his ready deference and artless admiration, when, as not unfrequently happens, Mr. Dolf's serenity has been ruffled by troubles of a sordid and domestic nature. The great man and his lieutenant have lately been prime movers in the establishment of a young men's mutual improvement society, of a tone at once political and literary—a society which was

to be trammelled by the presence of no Barnetts or other despotic elders. Any tyranny that might be found requisite in the new and improved brotherhood was, in short, to be exercised by Mr. Dolf Van Lennep in person, who, ardent soul! could no longer brook the post of second fiddle to any other performer.

Harry Soole was in high spirits this morning, having prevailed on an acquaintance who kept a small school for boys to lend his class-room of an evening for the purposes of the infant society.

'I had to promise him that he should recite sometimes,' quoth Harry; 'but think what it will save us, just at first, in rent! and we can always put him up at the beginning of the programme, just to set things a-start till folks are all seated.'

'And does old Maunder suppose,' says Dolf, with clouded brow, 'or were you such

an ass as to let him suppose, that I'm going to demean myself, and the society I have founded, with the stamp of his mouthings—to mar its nascent fortunes with a brand of rhapsodical inferiority? Not for a dozen paltry school-rooms! Nothing is more important than an imposing commencement. Old Maunder indeed!—and *you* promised him! I'm amazed at you, 'Arry Soole.'

Quite crest-fallen, poor Soole makes humble submission for his indiscretion, and after more talk the pair sally forth to call on the deacon of a very small chapel (denomination unknown), to whom was to be offered the honour of affording a rostrum for the aspiring orators of young Longborough. It might be imagined that no constancy could endure a course of such amenities as Dolf Van Lennep lavished upon his friend; but not only was poor Soole of a meek and unselfish disposition, he also

had a sister, one Sally Soole, on whom the mighty Dolf had deigned to smile, and it was the wish of his heart to see pretty Sally united to one of whose intimacy he was proud, and of whose future he predicted great things.

After the unceremonious departure of her son, the widow Van Lennep (who had buried her husband some six months before this time) hurried through her household duties, and passed into the shop. It was a low-ceiled, old-fashioned place, with a little bow-window on either side the front door. In one of these windows, where hung a few ancient time-pieces of dim and lumpish appearance, sat Rugg the journeyman, inspecting, through a black tube mysteriously screwed into his eye the works of a dilapidated watch. The other window had recently been fitted with some shelves, on which were displayed a few petty articles of

ironmongery—trivets, toasting-forks, and packets of nails and screws, which filled the shop with a prevailing fragrance of brown paper. After a sour glance at the untidy and phlegmatic assistant, the widow settled herself at a desk on the hardware side of the establishment, and began, with many sighs and a most mournful countenance, to con the pages of a ledger. She had not, however, been long thus employed, when the little bell's tinkling announced a possible customer, and looking up, she saw a gentleman in evident hesitation as to whom he should address.

'A church clergyman, I warrant him,' thought the widow as she surveyed the stranger, and threw an extra dash of chill acidity into her inquiry, 'And what can I do for you, sir, *if* you please?'

A member for years past of a congregation of Primitive Methodists is Matilda Van

Lennep, and unsavoury in her nostrils is the aroma of the establishment, even as represented by rosy portly little Mr. Holbrooke. Not all the jeers and gibes of a free-thinking husband, not all the neglect of a heedless son, had availed so to school her that she would forbear what she called her testimony on every due occasion. It had been all very well for the late Van Lennep, who cared nothing what a man's opinions were provided he could get him into an argument, to encourage church clergymen about the place during his tedious illness. His wife had been bound to put up with it, as she did with many other things ; but his widow was not going to stand any repetition of clerical patronage. So there was something almost repellent in the tone with which she repeated, 'Sir, *what* can I do for you ?'

Shamefaced and embarrassed, the rector of Swardham stood before her, and in his

inability to find words, and his desire to be diplomatic and conciliatory, was almost minded to temporize, and gain a pleasant footing by making a mild offer for the battered watches or the toasting-forks.

At last, when the widow had come to the conclusion that the man must be about to beg of her for some of his church follies and fal-lals, and was preparing to give him a crushing answer, he managed to stammer out that he had a matter of importance to broach in private, and, with a quaint little bow, presented his card. With a toss of the head, Mrs. Van Lennep led the way to her back parlour. No sooner had the door closed upon them, and the rector began again. 'Madame, you have a son,' than the widow, leaping to a fresh conclusion, completely changed her tone. She had heard from her Dolf an account, garbled for the maintenance of his own dignity, of the

occurrences in Hockerill's barn, and his encounter with John West; and now, seeing Swardham on the corner of the rector's card, she was seized with terrors lest her headstrong boy should be involved in trouble, whereof this parson might be the herald.

'Oh dear, sir,' she whined, 'it wasn't with my good will that the lad went nigh your place, and if it's anybody who ought to be punished for what happened, it's that Barnett! I'm sure, sir, my Dolf will be ready to apologize if he's hurt the gentleman —and I hope you'll take my word for it, and succour the widow, sir, and the orphan, as a true man of peace.'

Quite out of breath, she stopped, and as she wiped away a tear, saw only mild surprise in the perplexed face of her visitor.

'I am sorry to have given a wrong impression of my errand,' he said; 'it is of a very different nature—nothing to your son's

detriment—but' (with an irrepressible sigh) 'probably quite the contrary. Assuring you that I have important reasons for the question, may I ask whether you have been more than once married?'

'Law, sir,' gaped the widow, and her accent was altered, 'it's not what I like, being catechized by a stranger, and what my late husband would have strongly objected to, I can assure you. However, I've no reason to be ashamed of the truth. I have been twice married, being left a widow with twin babes when no more than a child myself, since which I have been wife to the late Mr. Van Lennep for eight-and-twenty years.'

'And your son, ma'am,—trust me, that I don't ask out of idle curiosity,—is he the son of the first or of the second marriage?'

How the poor rector's heart beat as he asked this question! He scarcely knew till

this moment how strong within him lingered hope that there might be a mistake, the detection of which should cause all these troubles to vanish away as nightmares before daylight.

'It's well, sir, for your chance of being answered,' said the widow slowly, with many nods of the head, 'that Erasmus—I allude to the late Mr. V.—is no more. He hadn't such respect for your cloth, fond as he was of an argument with any of you, but that he'd have shown the door to any man who asked him no more than you've asked me. But he's gone, and I see no call to make mystery about it. My son, sir, knows indeed no better at this moment than that he's son to Mr. Van Lennep, having been brought up as such from the time he was short-coated. It was his step-father's wish and desire; but his own father was dead and buried before ever he was born—he and

his little twin sister that was taken, sweet lamb! in her infant days—and his right name is the same as his—Adolphus, sir, and surname West, which was my name before it was Van Lennep. And now, sir, I make bold to ask, what of it?'

Sharply enough the widow propounded this natural inquiry, but slowly and dolefully, with aching heart, did her visitor unfold his marvellous tale.

'It is my duty, ma'am, to inform you that your son, in right of his father, supposing there is no mistake, can claim a very fine property in this county, in the part where I live; that is, of course, if you have proofs of his birth and identity.'

The little dumpy woman had fallen back in her chair, and with one hand pressed to her side, lay staring at Holbrooke with an almost painful gaze of astonished incredulity.

'His father!' she gasped. 'Are you sure, sir? Why, he ran through all he had, and often and often did he say to me, "Not a penny, Tilly, will you and I ever pocket from my side, not to keep us from starving!" And after all these years, too. There must be some mistake, I think: West's a common name enough.'

'But not Adolphus West. There is no mistake,' says the rector with a groan; 'and I come to you from your first husband's sister. Do you remember her?'

'What, her that came down to Ellington after poor Adolphus died—and her real lace fall and sable boa and muff? That I do remember,' the widow cried excitedly. 'And she's alive, is she? I never thought it. And sends a gentleman to me after all these years, to say my boy's to come into a fine property! It's kind of her, that it is!'

and rising, she dropped a flurried curtsey to the ambassador.

'Oh, ma'am,' with a full heart the rector replies, 'she is indeed kindness and goodness itself, and should she need kindness herself, there is no one who has earned such a claim to it. She is a widow, as you are; and has one only son, as you also have. God grant your heart may be as tender as hers has always been in her prosperity.'

Bewildered by the rector's impassioned utterance, Mrs. Van Lennep stared again, and faintly demanded,

'But about the property, sir, that you say is come to my Dolf? It couldn't be hers, of course, as she's alive; who's it come from, please?'

'Ma'am, you may have heard your neighbours talk of Squire West of Swardham —all Longshire folks know the Wests. Adolphus West, who married you, was the

younger son of old squire West—though I dare say he told you true enough that neither you nor he were likely to be a penny the richer for his family. He had disappointed his father, and the old squire cast him off. Only his sister was kind to him, and tended his dying bed—always remember that, ma'am!—and before he closed his eyes he made her promise not to let the old man know of his leaving wife or child. A solemn promise to a dying brother she made and kept! Well, ma'am, when the old squire died, not three years ago, he had no living son, and his only kith and kin, that he knew of, were his widowed daughter and her boy, who had lived in his house for years, and were both near and dear to the old man. To this grandson, John West as he is called, the old squire meant to leave his estate, which was in his own power to will to whom he pleased. It would have been just the same

if he had known of your son's existence; or rather, if he *had* known things could never have come about as they are like to do. For, in the belief that his two sons had died unmarried and childless, the old squire left unaltered a will made years before—a will by which a son of either of those two, if such a son there should be, takes the estate before the daughter's son.

Stopping abruptly after delivering himself of this horrid fact, the rector stole a glance at his auditor, while he wiped his troubled brow. Round-eyed and gaping, the widow sat as one transfixed, and Holbrooke was meditating a second and more lucid exposition of his tidings, when she found voice at last.

'The son's son before the daughter's son! that's right enough, all the world over, that is, whether the old gentleman left it so by accident or not. That means my Dolf, if

you're telling me truth, before his cousin. My Dolf a gentleman of property! Oh, God above us! A-a-h!' and with a stifled exclamation, and a flinging out of her fat hands, the widow sank back upon her patchwork cushion, and, to her visitor's unspeakable dismay, fainted away without further ado.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW ADOLPHUS TOOK IT.

GREAT was the indignation of Mr. Dolf when, on his unexpected return home, he found the shop deserted, and, diving into the back parlour, was confronted by two neighbouring matrons and a perturbed stranger of clerical appearance. Never of the sweetest or most placid temper, he had this morning been tried by failure and contumely. For the deacon, whom he had stooped to solicit for the use of a building, had not only flatly refused the accommodation, but had flouted and gibed at the new brotherhood as a gang of idle prentices and

good-for-nothings. Goaded and stung by this rebuff, Dolf could no longer endure the company even of his henchman, whose presumptuous arrangement it might now be necessary to ratify. Dismissing Soole, he stalked gloomily to his home, there intending to pour out his wrathful soul in a letter to the radical paper of Longborough.

If only the editor would for once be kind, he would surely make that grovelling deacon sorry for his churlish insolence! He had worked up several very fine sentences on his way to Britannia Street, and vast was his displeasure to find his privacy invaded, his journeyman fled, and his parent stretched upon the horse-hair sofa in the back room.

'Don't be frighted, Mr. Dolf,' says one of the matrons; 'yer ma'll soon be round agin —as her colour's coming back every minute: though like death indeed when Mrs. Brett and me was fetched in—as this good gentle-

man can explain to you better than me how it came about,' and the worthy lady darted a look of yearning curiosity towards Holbrooke.

At this moment Mrs. Van Lennep sat up on the sofa, and turned a bewildered gaze on the assembly, till her eye lit on her son.

'My boy,' she cried faintly, 'my own only son! this gentleman has news for you —ah, such news!'

In one minute after this intimation the matrons were dismissed, indignant and unsatisfied, to their own dwellings, and Dolf, still somewhat morose and scornful, was confronted with the herald of his amazing fortune. How the poor rector loathed in his heart, as he once more recited the necessary facts, this ungracious young demagogue! How he sickened at the thought of displacing from his pedestal brave, handsome Jack West, with his gallant bearing

and his haughty honourable spirit, to make room for this man, so destitute of breeding or presence, this sample of provincial radicalism of the lowest type. Could the same blood indeed flow in their veins? Alas! it seemed hopeless to dispute the fact, useless to blink the terrible consequences of an old man's disinclination for re-opening that which had been sealed, signed, and delivered as his *last* will and testament. And so Mr. Holbrooke gulped down his rising bile, and strove to speak fair this strange scion of an ancient tree, in the hope that magnanimity might, after all, be found to dwell in that narrow breast, and that more than strict justice might haply be meted to his innocent and most unfortunate kinsman by his puny supplanter. The mother sat by her son, as the tale was unfolded to his astounded ears, and at first held his hand, which soon he snatched from her, as excitement began to

master him. Once only did he turn and look into the dim blue eyes that were fixed on him so fondly; when, namely, the rector first touched on the secret of his parentage.

His hurried glance of inquiry being met by a solemn nod of confirmation, he was immediately absorbed again in the narration, and seemed to forget his mother's very presence. A breathless question showed now and then how eagerly and closely he followed the story—but towards the end he sank back on the sofa, with a white face and great drops standing on his brow, and looked so likely to follow his mother's recent example, and swoon away, that the apprehensive rector began to look timidly round for assistance, till an eager entreaty that he would go on with the narrative induced him to believe that Van Lennep was, as he declared, 'all right.'

'I think,' said Holbrooke, 'that I have

put you in the possession of the facts, Mr.—Mr. *West;* and your next step will, perhaps, be to call upon Mr. Scott (you know Scotts' in Friargate, they are the Swardham solicitors), whom I suppose you will find in a measure prepared to meet you. And now, Mr. West, I have, with a full heart and heavy, ended the business part of my visit; but I must ask your patience for a few words in addition. Mr. West, I have no friend in the world whom I respect and love as I do Mrs. West, your aunt, Rachel West, and there is no young man in whose future I take more interest, and whose merits I rate higher, than your cousin John West's, whose place, it seems, you are entitled to fill. Bear with me then while I beseech you to deal very tenderly with both in this their great and unexpected reverse of fortune. Forget all else, remember only that you come of one good old

stock, of which so few scions survive, that each should have high value in the other's eyes, and all the more that no one of you has wilfully wronged another.'

The poor rector's halt and tremulous eloquence was here checked by a sound as of dissent from him whom it is as yet hard to call Adolphus West.

'In what year was it that John West's grandfather, and—and mine, died?' asked the young man in low, deliberate tones, as he bent back, pale and frail but determined, on the cheap and vulgar sofa.

'It was over two years ago,' muttered Holbrooke, strangely discomfited.

'Nearly three years ago!' rejoined the other, with sudden and startling passion. 'Then for thirty long months or more the position which you came to-day to divulge to me has been mine by right, if I may believe your own tale. What though accident gave

the inheritance to the neglected outcast, the disgraced son's disowned issue, instead of to the proud young heir, son of the favoured daughter—the law takes no cognizance of an accidental element in a strictly legal bequest, as your friends well knew, Mr. parson! Nearly three years! My God! with the opportunities that should have been mine, what might I not have done with myself, my brains, my time, in these years during which I have been grovelling, tied to a hateful handicraft, brow-beaten and kept under by the very tradesmen who have crouched for the custom of Swardham Hall. And all this—this deadly, irreparable wrong, these years stolen from my prime—I am to forget, because tardy justice is done—and beg, I suppose, my kind relatives to keep, as a favour to myself, what they please of the wealth of which they have deprived me so long for their

own advantage! Oh! I can spare you the pains of your arguments, sir. Doubtless you would say that it is a sad pity for such ornaments of their rank to be ejected for the sake of one bred as I have been bred; but whose fault is it that I have been condemned to so long obscurity? Small thanks do I owe Mrs. West for this late rendering of justice; slight compunction shall I feel in ousting the haughty squire her son from his feudal abuse of power. And I scorn for one moment to disguise the sentiments which do and ever will actuate me.'

Sickened and dismayed, the rector darted his glance from the hot white face of the agitated young man to the mother's round inexpressive countenance. A woman's heart might still be touched by a sister's woes; and while alone with her, Holbrooke had thought Mrs. Van Lennep not unkindly

disposed. But alas for his hopes! the ample cap-borders were shaken by quite a tempest of indignation as the maternal soul, long waxing hot, was at last relieved by fiery words.

'She that seemed so grand and above poor folks' temptations! she that made believe to wish us well! *she* to keep my dear boy out of his own these long years last past, that we've been struggling so sore, and going down-hill so grievous, struggle as we might! A right down wicked bad woman I call her, and I won't mince my words; and mean too, if she would now seek to be beholden to the forbearance of them she has wronged so. But my dear boy is right, as he always is, to make no terms at all, but take all that the law gives him. My clever boy, he'll shine among the best yet; and let me tell you, humble as he may describe himself, and wronged as he

has been, he has not wanted for education, nor for profiting by it neither! What is right to be done he'll do it; but it won't be what you're sent here to beguile him into, and so I make bold to tell you, church-minister as you are.'

Quite out of breath the matron stopped, and possessed herself once more of the hand which her son had waved in languid deprecation of her harangue. But though silent, still she glowered at the man, doubly hateful as priest of a state church and ambassador of a presumably wily foe. She might indeed have been somewhat mollified could she have read the poor man's heart, or known the utter misery and sick despair which filled his breast as slowly he arose, and, picking up hat and stick, prepared to fly from the scene where his last spark of hope had been quenched. He could not obey Mrs. West's injunctions—he could not ask

these people to enter her presence or pollute Swardham with their feet earlier than should be absolutely necessary. And yet, wicked and base and unfeeling as he deemed them, he felt through all his horror of them a persuasion that a more acute and diplomatic person than himself might have succeeded better in his mission.

'I think,' he said, and his voice was sad and subdued, and he felt quite old and shaky while he spoke, 'I think that I had better be going, unless there is any other *business* topic on which I can afford you information.'

'If there is, sir,' replied the young man loftily, 'I can seek enlightenment of Mr. Scott, to whom I shall not fail to introduce myself at once.'

Bowing stiffly the rector passed from the house without another word, and turned to go, he knew not whither—nor would it

have greatly concerned him at that moment had an earthquake rent the pavement of Britannia Street and engulfed him in the bowels of a globe whence happiness and order had fled for ever.

CHAPTER X.

THE ANGEL OF DEATH.

ONCE more the rector and Mrs. West are met, in the lady's little sitting-room where hangs the family group. With dejected looks, head bowed down, and tremulous accents, Holbrooke has reported to his patroness the result of his visit to Britannia Street; striving, as he told his tale, to avoid all exaggeration, and yet wholly unable to extenuate the impressions produced on him by the mother and son. If aught indeed could have lightened his task and his heart, it would have been the gentle resignation, the perfect patience, with which Rachel

West learned the disposition of these relatives towards herself.

'My friend,' she said, when he touched on the vindictive feelings of Adolphus and his mother, 'they have suffered wrong, do not forget that, and at my hands. What reparation I can make shall be made, and it shall be made clear to them that my son has not injured them in thought, word, or deed. Be jealous for his sake, but not for mine. Let the world know that he steps forth from this place stripped of all save honour, but on *that* no spot! Courage, my old friend; you are not afraid that truth shall prevail! Nerve yourself, and me too, who in this matter lean upon you as my trusty stay. There is but one more step, and then I can say the bitterness of this, to which death seemed pleasant a while ago, is past! Yes, you must break it to John, and bring him to me. Mr. Scott will be in the

house, indeed, I think he is now in the library; and when we are all calm enough we can take counsel together as to what must be our next move. John has been in the steward's room with Ballard since his breakfast, you must waylay him there. Take him out to the end of the terrace, and tell him there,—her gentle voice sank lower, gentler as she went on;—'and then, as you bring him in, I shall be here at my window, and see how my boy bears it. He will look up at me, I think he will look up and smile love and forgiveness on his mother, my own brave darling! Now go, my faithful friend. He will prompt you with most meet words, Whom on my knees I will beseech for mercy while you are with my son.'

Wringing Holbrooke's hand convulsively, Mrs. West, whose outward calmness had so far been astonishing, sank in the attitude of

prayer upon a low seat, against the high carved back of which she leaned, and hid her face upon her clasped hands. Thus the rector left her, and with throbbing heart descended in quest of the unconscious squire.

Half-an-hour afterwards two men were leaning mournfully against the balustrade of mellow-tinted brick-work which bounded the terrace at Swardham.

'Hush a while,' said the younger in a low, weary voice, 'hush, and let me think a bit.'

It was a bleak March day, and a keen drying east wind swept over the park, where the rooks tacked laboriously on their voyages, and the withered ferns shivered, and the elms tossed their great arms, as if rejoicing that their buds could not as yet suffer from the nipping blast. Jack West's keen dark eyes roved over the familiar scene. They looked as dry and bright as usual, but they saw nothing. Never in his healthy

active life had his peaceful slumber been disturbed by nightmare, or he might have recognized in the tormented stupor which oppressed him something akin to the troubled sleeper's distress. Disinherited, ejected, a sham for two years past, a nobody for the future—he tried to shape these ideas, but his stunned mind refused to receive definite impressions, his brain seemed to whirl.

All at once there broke upon him an illuminating ray, pure from all selfishness, and as he heaved a vast sigh and turned abruptly towards the rector, all his heart spoke out in the words, 'Mother! God bless her!' He checked himself abruptly to look in the rector's face, which had by this time turned very red, and was now bedewed by a tear from either eye. Not a word could the good man utter, indeed, he had much ado to repress a rising sob, but he seized his old pupil's hand, and nodding his head

violently, motioned with it toward the house.

'So you've been keeping this to yourselves to spare me, you pair of conspirators,' Jack said, with a husky little laugh, 'as if I could not bear anything as long as *she* is all right;' and he strode along the terrace, head erect, a gallant sight for any woman's eyes, one to be idolized by her that bore him.

'She's—she's at her window, watching for you,' gasped the agitated rector, pulling at the other's coat lapel; 'let her see that her prayers are answered as you look up.'

In another moment they were within sight of the well-known casement, and Jack West stood still and bared his head, letting the March wind ruffle the black locks about his broad temples. A big, brave, strong-limbed man he always looked, and every inch a gentleman, but as he stood turning

up his face with a sad tender smile, there was lent to his features and to his whole mien a something which had not been there before—something which had never been seen by his lady-love at Marloes, or it must have quickened even the placid pulses of the lady Emily.

Almost with awe the rector marked the alteration, which brought to his mind reminiscences of martyrs or heroes pourtrayed by immortal hands in Italy of yore. At that moment the sun peeped, wan and sickly, from the grey cold sky, and his beam lit up the gallant, uncovered head, and glinted on the window-panes of the old red house. There was a movement of the curtain, where Rachel West knelt in the embrasure, and those who were looking beneath saw two clasped hands flung heavenward, as in rapture, and a white head sink forward till it rested on the

window-ledge, where the faint sunbeam crowned it with a silver halo. And so they found her resting when they reached her room, but the clouds had closed again over the sun, and only the cold daylight illumined the bowed head, the thin clasped hands, the kneeling figure in its black array. Holbrooke had stopped by the door, meaning to come forward presently, when he was startled by a cry, a startled shout of horror, from Jack West.

'Run, Holbrooke, quick, for God's sake! get help! let them ride off for the doctors! she has fainted—in a dead faint she is.'

Hastily snatching at the bell-rope, the rector ran to help West, who was trying to get his mother on to the couch, and in so doing, just as servants came in and called off Jack's attention, he caught sight of the face of his old friend, and in a moment his heart seemed to stand still, for he felt

that it was death on which he looked. It was not that any stamp of rigidity or sign of mortal struggle was discernible, rather was it the aspect of seraphic sweetness, of unutterable repose and youth renewed, which told the experienced parish priest that this world's troubles were over for Rachel West. While Jack was giving hurried directions to the butler, and the elderly maid hovered round, weakly wailing and wondering, Holbrooke laid his hand reverently on the serene brow, and pressed down the half-closed eyelids, and as he did so the room rang with the maid's sudden screams.

'Oh, my lady! my dear mistress! she is gone, yes, she is gone!'

Hurrying to his mother's side, Jack fiercely bid the woman be silent and leave the room, and stooping anxiously as he took the passive hand, said,

'What is it, Holbrooke? why do you look so? She will come to directly.'

But the rector answered not, and Jack, looking up with a vague numbness stealing upon his heart, saw eyes of mingled awe and pity, saw quivering lips, and a hand that pointed upwards, and then, when his eyes fell again, that still, white face, with its changeless smile and holy passionless calm. At once he comprehended it all, and there broke from his lips an exceeding bitter cry,—

'God pity me! He has taken her, and left me alone.'

A man of physical gifts inferior to those of John West, whose splendid constitution had suffered from no strain, might have been at such a moment spared for a while by the failure of his bodily powers from the torture of the anguished soul. But to West no such relief was for a moment possible

under the double blow that had befallen him. With all the full powers and unimpaired vigour of the prime of life, he began to serve his apprenticeship to anguish and woe, and cruel was the ordeal.

During the bleak days that followed Mr. Holbrooke seldom left his former pupil, and, in spite of the almost unbroken silence maintained by either, the younger man felt grateful for such companionship. He had referred once only to his loss of fortune, when he had been informed that until after the funeral all would remain as it had been, and had at once relapsed into the aching gloom of his sorely-wounded spirit.

In accordance with this intimation, Rachel West's burial was marked with all the solemn state which had been customary when a master or mistress of Swardham Hall was consigned to the vault where generations of Wests were laid. Strange

rumours were indeed already rife, noised in Longborough streets, and whispered in rural villages, as to a new claimant for the great Swardham estate, and a serious flaw in the title of the present squire ; but by common consent, all the world of Longshire agreed to behave upon the day of the funeral as if no such reports had been spread, expressing thereby the sincere respect and honour in which the deceased lady had been held by her neighbours. More of sympathy than might be expressed by such reticence none was found bold enough to express, though many were the chiefs of good old Longshire houses, and many were the ancient tenants who gathered round the grave of Rachel West. Many also were the furtive glances directed towards the tall figure of the chief mourner, who stood alone throughout the service at the coffin's head ; but such was John West's aspect and demeanour that

none could venture to touch his hand or murmur in his ear a word of condolence. Calm as he was and tearless, there was that about his set mouth and contracted brows which might have held the most familiar or the most officious at more than arm's length; and in many a Longshire hall and homestead men shook their heads that night in sorrow for the young squire, and feared that evil days were indeed, as rumour had predicted, fallen upon him whose best friend had been gathered to her fathers, taken, in God's goodness, from the sad days to come.

What Rachel West had suffered in the last two years of her life no mortal knew save her friend the rector. To her the angel of death came a merciful visitant, beckoning away the soul that was cleared by timely confession of its heaviest burden. And her last earthly feeling was a joy too deep for words, lit at the loving eyes which

were the last to gaze into her own. The struggle was over; her son knew all, and could smile upon his mother with new tenderness. The heart that had, when wrung with lonely terrors, continued to beat and ache with pain, burst with the sudden rapture of relief, and its pulses were stilled for ever.

CHAPTER XI.

DESDICHADO.

MEANWHILE John West had turned his back upon the desolate house where already he had learned to believe himself an intruder, and suffered the good rector to lead him in silence to his home, there to rest awhile until the weary new life should be fairly begun, and the fallen man could gather up his energies to rush forth into the turmoil of the rough world and lose himself. Already indeed he seemed inured to the stern conditions of loneliness and poverty; already had he lived a weary while, compared with which

the smooth time past seemed as a short dream. Ah, those inexorable moments! when one that is young and strong and unused to woe is roused by the grey dawn to grapple afresh with the eating cares which weighed him at last, after infinite miserable tossings to and fro, into a few hours' leaden slumber. Ah, those wakings, those quickening perceptions, astonished for the first short interval that all should not be well, then darkening, darkening, till as by a lightning flash the wounded soul is revealed to itself once more! Never shall John West forget the throes of those agonizing hours, endured while all the world around was unawaked, in which his very heart and soul seemed lost in black despair, in sick abhorrence of the future, looming so long and dreary.

But though at heart no stoic, no more invulnerable indeed than any other bruised

and hard-pressed sufferer in the grim battle of life, John West made no audible moan, and bore himself, as befitted one of his descent, staunchly. And one there was to whom he seemed in his encompassing distress and fallen estate almost an ideal of moral grandeur — a paladin, a paragon. Mary Holbrooke's generous and innocent heart thrilled, amid her deep sorrow, with reverent admiration for the patient, silent man whom, after the funeral, her father brought to the rectory.

'I know now,' she said to her sire in private, 'what a real hero looks like—the sort of man whom nothing on this earth can drive from his own true, noble nature. And I hope, yes, I trust and believe, that there is comfort on the wing for our hero from the quarter whence it will be most welcome. Ah! I could almost envy Lady Emily her chance of winning his heart over again.

Her beauty or rank may have had something to do with it before; but now she can show him that these are a woman's least charms; now she can prove herself worthy of even his love. And though of course they will be poor, comparatively poor at least, that will only add to her opportunity of showing what a woman can prove herself for true love's sake. And of course her father—it's lucky he's a duke—can find something for them which won't be unworthy of the squire. He's sure to be looking after something already, and then *she* can come to him and tell him. Oh, how delightful for her! don't you think so, papa?'

And for the first time for many days the cheerful music returned to Mary's voice. But no cheerful echo was provoked in the rector's answer, as he sighed and slightly shook his head.

'My little girl prates very precociously of lovers' constancy,' he said. 'I will hope that Lady Emily is all you picture her—but girls of her class have less freedom in disposing of themselves than you fancy, and from what I know of the duke, or rather of his wife, I'm not very sanguine.'

'Freedom, papa!' cries Mary indignantly; 'that's just it, she's *not* free, and would not be free for all the world, I'm very sure. She is his, and all the dukes and duchesses in these kingdoms could not come between them now. Oh, father! it's the only thing left to him; how can you think so ill of women as to doubt that she will be brave and true, and help him to bear his burden, and teach him in time to be quite happy again?'

'My dear,' replies her father seriously, 'you run on too fast in your good-will. The squire, at any rate, thinks fit to offer

to release this lady from her engagement, and though the step is not taken as yet, it looks ill that no sign has been made from Marloes since these miserable events have been noised about. I know the duke is an invalid, and to be sure he sent a carriage, and that Captain something, who is his agent, to the funeral; but, my dear, I would not have you expect much from that quarter. It is a cold, hard world that great people live in, for the most part—may you never know more of it than at present!'

Mary was silenced for the time, but none the less did her tenderly romantic soul spurn her father's inference, at least as regarded Lady Emily's probable conduct. If there were indeed, beneath ducal coronets, sordid and unfeeling brains, of what weight could the cruelest opposition of relentless parents prove when balanced against a suffering hero's love? Doubtless from the

noblest motives he might offer to cancel the engagement—it was honourable—it was like him; but that such an offer could be accepted by an affianced woman, Mary altogether refused to believe. Even if (as was unlikely) she had failed to love him as he deserved in his prosperity, surely now from this furnace of affliction her love would come forth more bright and pure to recompense the manly heart aching for the loss of such a mother and such a home!

While Mary thus thrilled with hope and sympathy, and West, wrapped in sad immobility, endured the slow hours, there was commotion and uneasiness at ducal Marloes. At the first whisper (conveyed by the captain-agent) that there was a screw loose about the Swardham property, and the old lady had not gone off a week too soon to avoid most unpleasant disclosures, the duke had been importuned by his better half to

hasten in person to Longborough, and there demand from Scott the lawyer (who also attended to the Hexham interests in the locality) the truth of these sinister reports.

'Our child's future may depend on your Grace's instant action,' quoth the duchess impressively; but all her appeals, all her eloquence, failed to draw the duke from his lair, or even wring his consent to the lawyers being summoned to Marloes.

'Get Herriard to look to it,' he said at last, peevishly; 'why should he not do something to earn what he makes me allow him?'

But Lord Herriard, who was the heir of the house, was not on the most cordial terms with his step-mother, nor so particularly interested in his half-sister as to leave his clubs for Longshire in her behalf. This the duke moreover knew so well, that his answer must be considered in the light of an evasion. Foiled in her efforts, at length

the anxious mother repaired in person to Scott's office in Longborough, where she was closeted for some time with the head of the firm, and, it may be presumed, received confirmation of her worst fears.

'It's not as if your heart was in it,' she said to her daughter on her return from Longborough, in which town she had not, in spite of divers precautions, escaped notice as completely as she could have wished; 'it's most mortifying, but it's not as if your heart were in it.'

'Heart!' quoth Lady Emily bitterly, as she tore strips from her pocket-handkerchief; 'don't bother about hearts, if you please, mamma; but I believe I am the unluckiest girl that ever was born.' The oppressed parent only making answer by a shrug, the daughter went on with increasing volubility, 'Of course I'm not going to marry a hulking pauper—but

suppose, after all, things turn in his favour —there will be a lawsuit no doubt—he can't be stupid enough not to make a fight when he has been in possession so long, and possession is nine points of the law, they say. And then where shall I be?'

'You don't suppose, Emily, that I am not anxious to get you a husband, or likely to let this man slip if he were worth having. I have taken every possible trouble for you in the matter,—degrading myself to wheedle that dreadful attorney, and submitting to be stared at by his vulgar clerks and all the rabble of that odious town,—and you'll allow me to be the better judge, and I tell you you may as well make up your mind at once that it's all over, remember that!'

'Very well, mamma, very well,' cried Emily, with a burst of angry tears; 'you have committed yourself and me too, per-

haps—but you remember *this*, that if I have to give it up, I don't stir from here ever again, or face anybody!—how could I, after asking Agatha Catesby and those hateful Verinders to be my bridesmaids, and settling about the diamonds being reset, and all that. You have made a mess of me, and a mess of it all, and I wish I had never been born, that's all,' and here she choked with her conflicting emotions.

'I had best leave you to come to your senses, Lady Emily,' said the incensed parent, rising majestically; 'and one day you may repent your thankless, stubborn behaviour to your only friend.'

Shortly after this little scene came to the duke John West's letter; but in the interval he had first ridden over to Marloes, hoping to spare himself the writing of such a letter; hoping perhaps (for Mary's simple trustfulness may have been contagious, and

she had ventured on just a word) that beneath the roof which sheltered his betrothed and his distant kinsman his crushed spirit might find balm. West had called, as so many times he had called at that door during the months last past, but, for the first time, the well-trained servants had denied him admission. His Grace was at home, but rather worse to-day. Her Grace was not at home. In his recognized position as affianced lover of the daughter of the house, John West might have been justified in asking for the Lady Emily, but tokens of less significance would have sealed his lips against another word. So the letter was written—a formal letter, as had been that other in which he solicited the honour of the lady's hand, and with a sigh of relief the duke tossed it over to his wife.

'There — nobody need have bothered

after all: it's quite true that a rightful heir has turned up, and all that—and of course West is too much of a gentleman to continue in a false position here. You had better write him something appropriate, and then look up the fortunate cousin who steps into his shoes.'

With this parting sarcasm the duke immersed himself once more in a treatise on asthmatical affections, and was deaf to the reproaches and bemoanings which assailed him while the duchess lingered in his room.

With reluctant tread the lady then sought her child, who had fortified herself in impenetrable sulkiness since the interview last recorded between herself and her mother.

'You must return the rings and things, Emily, and then it will be all over,' she said, with an assumption of cheerfulness which,

spying in her daughter's face a mulish look, she could not feel.

'You are all against me, it seems,' the young lady muttered presently; 'but I know that lawsuits are never over in a hurry, and I tell you, while there is a chance I won't let him off, whatever papa says, or you or he either.'

'But, Emily, the man must be answered, and how are you to keep him dangling? you could not have the face to throw him over, after *that*, as soon as he is absolutely turned out of Swardham.'

'Just you let me alone, mamma. I'm old enough to think for myself, and manage my own affairs—and he shall fight it out; it must be nine to one in his favour, whatever you may say.'

'Of all wrong-headed young women, Emily, I think you are the most obstinate,' cried the duchess, out of patience. 'I tell

you it is all settled without a fight, as you call it; he hasn't a leg to stand upon, or more right at this moment in Swardham than *you* have, or are ever likely to have. You don't suppose he would be fool enough to give up such a property without a struggle if he had the remotest chance against this cousin!'

'Then is there no lawsuit?' said Lady Emily, slowly.

'Of course there is not! Mr. West has little money enough left to be willing to squander it on hopeless litigation; and answered he shall be at once, and most decisively, so let me have no more nonsense.'

'No lawsuit!' repeated the Lady Emily, an angry light kindling in her cold blue eyes; 'then he just lets the other man turn him out, and never lifts a finger? I don't believe it; you are all in a conspiracy

against me, and he as well. But if it's true, I despise him and hate him for his poor spirit! Why, the cousin might have been glad to do something handsome in the way of compromise if he had shown a bold front, and threatened to fight him inch by inch! I despise him, I do, the coward!—and I'm the most miserable girl in all England.'

Once more a flood of tears came to end this burst of vindictive eloquence, and the duchess, towering above her daughter as she sat crouching on her sofa, rated her with an energy that might have surprised the polite world in which she serenely moved.

'And let me tell you,' so she wound up, 'that, in spite of all his bad luck, in my opinion he has a happy escape of you and your tempers, Lady Emily, of which I ought to be a judge after nearly thirty years' bitter experience of both.'

CHAPTER XII.

AN AMBASSADRESS EXTRAORDINARY.

MEANWHILE, in unconsciousness (happy unconsciousness it could scarcely be called) of the contempt of Lady Emily Woodvil, John West was steadfastly pursuing that course which alone seemed possible to him under the present aspect of his affairs. Once convinced of the identity of the so-called Dolf Van Lennep with his uncle's lawful son, of which identity no legal proof was wanting, he had dismissed all thought of battle or even of compromise, and declared his willingness, nay, his anxiety, to divest himself as soon

as might be of all that appertained to the headship of his family, and to account with minute accuracy for the arrears of which he had innocently deprived his cousin. On discussing with the legal gentry this latter subject, he had at first been met by protestations and assurances that, under the circumstances, no claim could or at least would be made for any such back payments. But such protestations he had gravely put aside, and made it clear that it was his set purpose to refund, as far as within his means it lay, every penny which he had innocently appropriated since his grandfather's death. As undoubted heir to his mother, John West (no more to be called the young squire) had succeeded to the fortune settled upon her by her father, no less a sum than twenty thousand pounds; and this money would, he felt with deep thankfulness, suffice to replace all that had

passed through his hands of the family revenue during his two years of squiredom. The rector had been moved to tears in the warmth of his deprecation of this step.

'Will you strip yourself of all, to give this man more who has too much already?' he said piteously. 'Oh John! it will be enough to make the old squire turn in his grave, it will indeed.'

But John had firmly though affectionately put the rector's opinion aside, reminding him that his grandfather was, above all things, a strictly just and honourable man.

'I am young and strong,' he said, 'why should I ignobly seek to cling to this money, and begin a new life under a crushing burden of obligation to my unknown cousin? Why should I not make my way like another?'

The rector groaned as he thought how ill-reared and trained his old pupil had been

for beginning the world as those others might do. But he knew West's nature too well to argue with him on the point, and in this matter, as in all others, loyally carried out his instructions in frequent interviews with the Messrs. Scott. These gentlemen had no notion of losing the Swardham business because of a mere change of ownership, and now appeared as zealous agents of Adolphus West, Esquire, on whose behalf they offered no further opposition to the restoration of the last two years' income of the estate. Many questions there were indeed which might have been raised, and which poor Holbrooke wished to raise, as to monies expended in improvements on the property, the sum paid as succession duty, and so on—but into these questions John West persistently refused to enter.

'What though my cousin has, as you represent, the whole benefit of this or that

outlay—I should not like another man to spend my income for me, however judiciously; and I'm only thankful that all this occurred before I plunged into less remunerative expenditure.'

He was thinking no doubt of his inchoate candidature, of the promised mastership of the hounds; but on these subjects, or others akin to them, he dropped no word while he sojourned, a silent, secluded inmate, beneath his old friend's roof. Concerning another of the rosy visions which had faded the same absolute silence had not been observed.

Mary Holbrooke, who thought little of seats in Parliament or honours in the hunting-field, thought, as was natural to her sex and years, much of affairs of the heart; and as one who had been familiarly known to John West since she could run alone, had even ventured (as has been hinted) to sound him on the subject of his engagement

with Lady Emily. Though a proud man, West had none of the self-conceit which might have led him to picture his aristocratic betrothed as ready to sacrifice all else for his sake. On the other hand, however, though far from an ardent lover or expectant of ardent devotion, he had no inkling of the real sentiments which actuated the lady, and was moved to considerable distress when Mary, implicitly believing every word she uttered, touched on the anguish which must be the portion of a girl in so trying a position.

'You ought not to think so much of her father and mother and rank, and all that. They are all hard on her, I am afraid; but your duty is to her only, till she tells you with her own mouth that she rejects it, and that will be never.'

Mary's eyes kindled as she spoke, and her mouth quivered with pretty emotion, so

that he wondered that he had never noticed before how charming a girl his old plaything and pet was grown.

'I must think over this,' he said at last; 'I would spare her in every way, poor thing, but it's a desperate lookout for us.'

Despair, however, found no place in Mary Holbrooke's vocabulary. It was a blow when her hero was denied admission at Marloes; a blow when a hard little note from the duchess arrived in answer to West's letter; but Mary built her hopes high yet on Lady Emily herself, and after much pondering, formed the audacious resolution of seeking for herself an interview with the daughter of ducal Marloes. It seemed to her, this tender little creature, that these two were in danger of drifting asunder, despite their plighted troth. It seemed also that shipwreck must be the sole end of such drifting. And if she, poor mouse as she

was, could succour these noble animals in the meshes that environed them, she must forget her mouse-like shyness and hasten to do and dare, offering herself, if need be, a sacrifice on the altar of true loyal friendship. And had John West been in her eyes of less heroic proportions, less god-like in his suffering, it is certain that this determined young woman would have been equally devoted to his cause, if only for her sake whom both mourned so passionately—the mother and godmother whose loss had drawn those who survived of her dear ones nearer together than of old.

Once resolved, Mary was prompt in action and silent as a genuine conspirator. In the sadness and strangeness which had unhinged all the pleasant old order of things at the rectory, the comings and goings of the daughter of the house were all unquestioned, and the melancholy and pre-occupied rector,

only too thankful to be relieved by her of all parochial business which a girl could undertake, referred to such business her absences from the house or the table. On a certain Sunday then Mary quietly ordered the pony-chaise to be ready after morning service, and drove herself off, merely remarking to the servants that she would not be present at lunch.

'Ah,' said her father, when he heard the announcement, 'she will have gone to Mrs. Weavers at the Quarries; I ought to have gone myself before this.'

But it was not in the direction of the Quarries that Mary was urging the smart brown pony. There was, close to one of the gates of the Marloes demesne, a new church, served by a dapper little parson, of High Church proclivities, at which, attracted perhaps by the brevity of the frequent services, the ladies of the great house had

of late been reported to attend when they felt observant of the Sunday; and this church, in pursuance of her deep designs, was Mary's present goal, as she whipped her sure-footed pony through the lanes on a faultless spring day. Small heed did she pay to the carols of birds, the primrose banks, and gambolling lambkins as she sped along; for all her simple wits were bent on the one object—how she might best serve John West and advance the holy cause of true love.

Of the hours of service at St. Michael's Mary was by no means certain, but she had a general idea that the whole gamut ecclesiastical, from prime to compline, was duly celebrated by the Reverend Mr. Newlight, and bravely purposed stabling her steed with a friendly farmer hard by, and sitting out any number of the 'offices,' till perchance the Lady Emily might bestow her

august presence upon the scant rustic congregation. The bells were tinkling briskly as Miss Holbrooke took her seat on the side of the church allotted to her sex, and among the benches three bonnets only were to be descried, no one of which could possibly belong to a scion of our proud aristocracy. From the distant vestry arose a hum as of the voices of choristers, and now and again a white-robed figure peeped into the almost empty building. Things looked unpromising for the young adventuress, as the last bell ceased, and the tittering in the vestry gave place to a chanted prayer, and a shuffling of feet, as though the procession were being formed. But, at the last moment, an old man stationed at the door hurried up the aisle, and poking his head in among the choir boys, audibly announced that some of the quality were coming in at the gate. All the bonnets turned at once

doorwards, and, with beating heart, Mary also turned her head, though she held a hymn book to her face, and beheld the advance of a tall and splendid lady, with beautiful fair hair and blue eyes, whom, at due distance, a gorgeous flunkey followed, bearing an umbrella and a very small ivory-backed prayer-book. Mary had never set eyes on Lady Emily Woodvil, but she felt at once that this could be none other, and while rejoicing at this fortunate chance of her solitary presence, and yielding reverent homage to her charms, felt a little disappointed and discouraged that the distressed damsel should prove so stately and mature a personage. But had she been another Queen of Sheba, she was John West's betrothed, and Mary meant to have speech of her before she should regain the ducal roof.

'Of course she is grand-looking,' said

Miss Holbrooke to herself while the chanted prayer was once more rehearsed for the great lady's benefit; 'I can't expect a duke's daughter to be a little body such as I, but her heart is much the same kind of thing, I dare say, as another girl's.'

Out filed the little string of choristers, at their heels out came Mr. Newlight in a pea-green stole, neatly embroidered with gold crosses *pattées*, his joined palms protruded from his narrow chest, and in a few moments the service (function would be Newlight's term) commenced in swift monotonous sing-song. I fear that Mary Holbrooke could have given but a poor account of its nature or diversifications, but it was at any rate soon ended, though it comprised the catechizing of a few children by another priest. The surplices disappeared as they had come, and the few worshippers tarried motionless till it pleased the Lady Emily to

pass forth. No sooner had the wearers of the ancient bonnets risen in the wake of the splendid apparition, than Mary darted to the door, all impatience to get the first horrid plunge over. But alas! when she reached the porch, it was to see Mr. Newlight, divested with wondrous speed of his priestly raiment, bowing and smiling at the lady's side, while he held her in conversation. Mary lurked in impatience behind a buttress, unconscious of the flunkey's patronizing approbation of her appearance, and counted the moments while Mr. Newlight inquired with solicitude after the health of duke and duchess, and talked glibly of the weather. Stupid little man! how lucky that, according to a red-lined notice on the door, he had another function in half-an-hour, and could not wander far from the scene of his ministrations. At last, at the little wicket, Lady Emily made a graceful

bend and turned from the enchanted divine, past whom Mary shot without ceremony as he retraced his steps to his vestry door.

Now for it! there was no human being in sight save the sauntering footman; and, taking her courage tight in her two hands, Mary stood by the side of the stately daughter of the Duke of Hexham.

'I believe I have the pleasure of speaking to Lady Emily Woodvil,' she said, and met the cool gaze of two fine blue eyes unflinchingly.

Who could it be that ventured thus to waylay the quality?—a lady, thus much Lady Emily owned to herself as probable—but ladies are now-a-days only too much given to pestering the quality, in and out of season, for subscriptions and so on. Most likely a beggar after all in cunning guise. Now Lady Emily had a strong objection to charitable appeals, and

her manner was very chilling as she replied,

'I am Lady Emily Woodvil, but I cannot recall that I have the honour of your acquaintance.'

With a blush that rose to her forehead Mary faltered out,

'I beg your pardon—but I am the rector of Swardham's daughter, and — and Mr. West has been staying with us since he left the Hall. I have known him all my life, and would do anything to serve him, or— or you either, Lady Emily.'

She had thought of all sorts of clever ways of introducing the subject as she drove along, and afterwards in church, but this was all she could manage to say—'blurting it out so boldly,' as she immediately told herself. With one sharp glance at the glowing face Lady Emily turned to her domestic and ordered him to walk on by

the nearest road to the house, and then nodding to Mary, asked her if she would mind a turn in the park. Joyfully acquiescing in this proposal, Mary soon found herself pacing along a walk which followed the line of the park paling and was sheltered by a belt of trees.

'And am I to understand that you come to me from Mr. West, Miss—I beg your pardon?'

'Holbrooke is my name, Lady Emily; and I must at once avow that I am here without Mr. West's knowledge or consent. My one excuse consists in my fervent wish to show gratitude to those who have been my father's best friends and mine, and Mr. West is now the only one left.'

Mary stopped, out of breath, and looked up shyly at her companion, who merely gravely inclined her head, but looked not indisposed to hear more.

CHAPTER XIII.

AUDIENCE OF LADY EMILY.

THE truth was that Lady Emily, despite her unruffled exterior, was just now in a flutter of not unpleased excitement. On the day previous she had received a private letter from a friend, and had read a paragraph in a public print, both of which had furnished food for much pondering. The letter was from one of 'those hateful Verinders' whom she had bespoken as her bridesmaids and conveyed to the writer's dearest Emily the news that the writer, Cecilia Verinder, was about herself to appear as a bride. The paragraph in the *Illustrated London News* related to the will

of the late Mrs. West, which had just been proved under twenty-two thousand pounds, and which was further stated to have enriched by that amount the only son of the testatrix. A few years back Lady Emily would have scorned the idea of accepting a man whose wealth was limited to a score of thousands, but times were altering with her; and here was Cecilia, most odious and stuck-up of dear friends, about to embark in matrimony in company with a younger son whose fortune must be of even slenderer dimensions, and crowing and cackling insufferably over her triumph! If anything could be wanting to intensify Lady Emily's disgust with spinsterhood, it would be the prospect of seeing this her friend and confessed inferior a happy wife.

'Bertie has quite enough in hand to work along with in decent style for the

next five years or so, and if by that time neither his father nor mine has had the grace to increase our means by dropping off or otherwise, at any rate we shall have had a jolly time of it before we are positively ancient, and I never heard of a peer's daughter in a workhouse, if the worst comes to the worst. And so, dear, unless you make very great haste indeed, I'm afraid you'll have to look out for another bridesmaid.'

'Hateful creature!' the recipient of this candid effusion had remarked to herself; 'I know she has heard that things have gone wrong with me, and she begins to give herself airs.'

Then came the chance notice of the paragraph in the *Illustrated,* striking, as it were, while the iron was at its hottest. Nobody, so ruminated the Lady Emily, was more calculating than Cecilia. If she

could make up her mind on the strength of such arguments to venture 'for better for worse' on her miserable little Bertie, why not take a leaf out of her book and call back John West, who had so luckily been only half discarded, and who would be, after all, a better match than Cecilia's captive! Twenty thousand pounds might be made, with economy, to supply for some years the brougham, the footman, and all the etceteras which make wedded life tolerable—and surely, for the distant future, the Duke of Hexham's daughter's prospects must be better than those of Miss Verinder, with her jaunty repudiation of the workhouse! But how to bring John West back to her feet with speed and yet with decorum! That had been the problem, and now the timely appearance of this little person from Swardham seemed likely to solve it most charmingly. How thankful

she felt that she had been obstinate with her mother, making no visible sign of acquiescence in West's dismissal! How vast the load lifted from her soul by the thought that after all Cecilia might not steal a march on her, nor condole with her from the eminence of matrimony as she recommenced her well-nigh hopeless career! How soothing under these circumstances an assurance of the constancy of her unlucky betrothed! Thus it was with blandness scarcely tempered by condescension that Lady Emily turned her eyes on the little diplomatist and murmured some acknowledgment of the zeal which she professed. Much encouraged, Mary hastened on with her mission.

'You are still engaged to Mr. West, are you not, Lady Emily?'

'I have certainly done nothing to cancel our engagement, sad as are the clouds

which have interposed between us. But you probably know, Miss Holbrooke, that Mr. West wrote—'

'Yes, yes,' cries Mary rapturously; 'I know what he wrote—he thought it his duty because he can no longer endow you as he meant to do when he asked you to be his wife! But I knew also that you would not accept such an offer of release; I was sure of it, and I am glad to find I was right. You love him, and he loves you, and nothing must be let to part you.'

In her joy at finding John West's affianced love so true, as she thought, and worthy of him, the impetuous child seized Lady Emily's ungloved right hand, and pressed it to her rosy lips. A strange wild little person truly, but likely to be useful, so Emily only smiled serenely on her new adorer, and waited to hear what would

come next, biding her time for some practical proposal for future action.

'Ah, I need not tell *you* how noble he is under his trials! You knew dear Mrs. West, and can understand how he grieves for her, more deeply than for Swardham.'

Lady Emily still looked sweet, but kept silence. She had viewed Mrs. West as a prospective mother-in-law, with probably a will of her own and frumpish notions, and the removal of such an obstacle seemed to her seasonable enough. Besides, the excellent old lady had left behind her those two-and-twenty thousands!

'It is not wealth that he cares for, though it is a sad blow to lose the dear old place. With his talents he will, I am sure, quickly make a name and a place in the world when he feels that he has *you* to work and hope for! And it is just that which makes me thank heaven for your

noble constancy! If *you* were lost to him, as well as mother and home and fortune, he might never put forth the power that is in him, he might be content just to drift or to sink—but for your sake he will be brave and bright, and hew a way for himself: I know it is in him!'

Softly murmuring, 'You over-rate my influence I fear, dear Miss Holbrooke,' Lady Emily wondered whether Mary knew of the old lady's will, and would presently mention it, or was she too gushing to be at all practical? At any rate things were looking well for the meditated recall of the suitor.

'He has behaved so nobly,' Mary went on at score; 'he won't hear a word against this cousin, and even means to have an interview with him. And though papa tried his best to dissuade him, and so do the lawyers, I feel sure that *you* will think

him right in insisting on refunding all that he spent while he thought Swardham was his.'

Lady Emily turned cold with prescience of evil, but her voice was gently modulated as ever as she interjected, with sweet surprise,

'Refunding? but how can he? I thought that he had lost his all!'

'And it makes no difference to you, of course, that he *has* nobly stripped himself of his last penny! He inherited all that dear Mrs. West had to leave; and some men would have clung to it, and besought the cousin's mercy, no doubt! But that is not in our Mr. West's nature—he rejoiced that his mother's fortune sufficed to cover all arrears, all that he spent innocently while he was master of Swardham Hall, and has made it over in full. Soon, soon may such nobleness and talent be rewarded by twice

as much; and *that* he will soon gain, if I may tell him to-night that you are unchanged, and will hope and pray for the time when you can reward his perseverance.'

Colder and colder turned the Lady Emily as she bit her trembling lips. Her instincts had not then been in fault when she expressed contempt for John West as a spiritless prey in the clutch of the despoiler, and at this moment she hated him for his magnanimity. Gone! given away! the thousands which were to have enabled her to cry checkmate with Cecilia Verinder! Gone the last hope of being married and settled at last, after so many weary seasons. It had been a poor thing this last chance, but it was the more humiliating to have lost it, and in such a manner. She felt that she hated West, and she hated this gushing little parson's daughter who so romantically sang his ridiculous praises, and

kindly invited her, the Duke of Hexham's daughter, to linger on in the ridiculous chains of a hopeless engagement, and employ her leisure in praying for the happy hour when she might wed a middle-aged barrister, or perchance wine-merchant, as soon as he should find means to furnish a villa in Camden Town! When she could trust herself to speak, it was in freezing tones that she slowly addressed the girl by her side.

'I am deeply pained, Miss Holbrooke, to learn thus that Mr. West should have thought fit to take a step so momentous as this disposition of his mother's fortune without consulting me, or apparently considering me in any way. I may add that my pain is not lessened by your mode of communicating a proceeding which I should have learned from Mr. West alone, and which I can only characterize as most deplorable—yes, most heartless and deplorable.'

Incredulous horror holding poor Mary silent, Lady Emily went on with a severer glance and increasing acrimony,—

'Feeling that I am speaking to a partisan, whom I cannot acquit of officiousness in seeking an interview with me under such deplorable circumstances, nor scarcely of a most unbecoming desire to take me at a disadvantage, I shall say no more, except to request that you, Miss Holbrooke, at once withdraw as you came, to repent, and repent, I beg, in silence, the liberty that you have taken.'

With a majestic inclination Lady Emily was for turning her back, but she had reckoned without her host if she thought thus to abash Mary Holbrooke. Wheeling promptly, so as again to confront the stately form, she spoke such words as honest indignation supplied.

'If I understand you, and you under-

stand me, of which there's little doubt, I will not say what manner of woman you stand revealed. But mind! I'm not a bit ashamed of coming here; it's you who ought to be ashamed; and I make no promise of keeping what I have heard and seen to myself. I am too much John West's friend to do so, and I am no friend of yours, though an hour ago I would have done anything in the world to serve you. I am glad that you have let me see what you are; and it is enough to make us that are Mr. West's friends content that he has lost all else, so long as he is safe from you! Oh, to think that he, of all men, should be valued just for what he possesses, and not for himself! Oh, I can never stand up again for women when they are abused as mercenary after the lesson you have taught me, Lady Emily Woodvil!"

Quite out of breath she stopped, and

faced unflinchingly the fork lightning flashed from those blue eyes.

'Out of my sight!' gasped the infuriate aristocrat, stamping her foot, 'out of my sight! John West is a poltroon and a fool, encouraged in his wanton beggary by you and yours for your own base designs! I would order him to be turned out of this park if he ventures here again, as I will quickly order *you!* Insolent, indelicate girl! it is plain enough that you are in love with him and want him for yourself, and I wish you joy of your pompous beggar.'

Crimson and panting, Mary strove to detain her assailant till she could find words, but the other twitched her skirts from her hands, and with rapid steps made straight across the sward for the house, from which they were now not far removed. Left alone, Mary leaned against a tree and gave way to a passion of tears. The woman was all

that is base and false, and she could grudge no suffering incurred in her detection. Into what fresh misery, but for this dreadful interview, might not her ill-advised championship have betrayed her hard-pressed friend? But oh, the sting, the sting of that vile charge, hurled against her father and her no less innocent self! Oh, those wicked curling lips, that had lured John West with soft speeches, what venom could they drop.

'God above knows my heart,' sobbed Mary: 'He knows how my love for my almost mother has bound me to her son. Why does He let such wicked slander take shape in words? I am innocent, innocent of what she said; but oh, if I thought that he would hear that shameful charge, and perhaps, even for a second, believe it, I should pray to die!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEW SQUIRE.

'WITH a warm Liberal, sir, at the head of this great estate the balance of parties in the county will be reversed, sir, quickly reversed; and who so fit a representative of the cause of enlightenment and enfranchisement as a Liberal squire of Swardham! I'll trust you'll think of it seriously.'

So spake a jaunty little man, Clark by name, and by profession an attorney, and junior of the firm of Scotts' in Longborough. And as he spake, he rejoiced in having for the time the ear of the new master of Swardham, in whose own room the pair

were closeted. Civil as were all the partners in the Longborough firm, Mr. Clark was more than civil to the new client, skilfully contriving to infuse a dash of laud and honour into the most dry of their business discussions. Adolphus West (*cidevant* Van Lennep) was already aweary of business discussions, and not averse to Mr. Clark's compliments as a diversion, and had accordingly signified his pleasure that the junior partner, rather than either of the Messrs. Scott, should wait upon him when such interviews were necessary. Nevertheless, he was reclining rather listlessly in an arm-chair (poor Jack's arm-chair), as he listened to Mr. Clark, and made no very encouraging answer to that gentleman's flattering hints as to Parliament. He had bid a long farewell to trade and penury. He had just succeeded, unexpectedly but by unimpeachable right, to a fine property ;

his patience had been tried by no protracted litigation, by no death-struggles on the part of the man whom he had ousted; he had even, by the scrupulous honour of this cousin, been put in possession of a large sum of ready money, which came very handy for manifold expenses; but already he had been reminded that all is not gold that glitters, and had found his new position, in spite of its grandeur, no bed of roses.

First and foremost he was irked by the existence, if not absolutely by the presence, of the dispossessed cousin. The man, arbitrary and domineering as he had in former days deemed him, had behaved well, undeniably, abominably well. But why could he not go away and never be heard of again? Why, above all, was he capable of proposing a meeting with his cousin? It was all very well to say that he had certain favourite schemes for the weal of the

tenantry to commend to his supplanter's notice. It might be so, but he probably also wished to see what figure the supplanter cut in the garb which he had perforce resigned. He must know that it would make his cousin very uncomfortable, and that was why he was bent upon this interview. Then there was that unlucky visit to Swardham in the train of old Barnett, and under the auspices of those Hockerills—what would Adolphus West, Esq., not give to blot out from the memory of his servants, humble neighbours, and tenantry all remembrance of that humiliating adventure. No doubt he would always be (as Mr. Clark said) a warm Liberal —so far he could go without derogating from his position—but he began already to see the inexpediency of many of his ancient notions, and to doubt the feasibility of many long-cherished aspirations. Alto-

gether, though he struggled to seem quite at his ease, and had already disgusted the old servants at Swardham by his quick assumption of masterful airs, he was somewhat disappointed with his own development as a man of fortune, and less inclined to resent advice than when first he sought Scott's office in Longborough.

'Then you think I ought to see him?' he said after a pause, during which he tapped his rather prominent front teeth with a gold pencil case. 'I'd rather not, you know, and it can do no good that I know of.'

'My dear sir, if you'll excuse me, in your prominent position, and with your ambition, you must consider what the public will think, as well as your own inclination. And the public will condemn you, it will, indeed, to a man, here in Longshire, if you refuse to see your cousin before he leaves these parts.'

Adolphus West frowned and made some pettish reply, conveying a hope that he was above being swayed by the breath of the mob; but of course he yielded in time, and on the very next occasion of his visiting Scott's office in Longborough, he found himself by and by left in a private room alone, whither presently entered a tall grave man, with handsome proud features and black hair, looking far older than the young squire, who, one evening not very long ago, had chucked Dolf van Lennep over the waggon rail like an empty sack in Hockerill's barn. Older, but not less strong nor resolute, and with keen anger Adolphus felt himself quail as the other walked straight up to him.

'Cousin,' he said, when he stood before him, 'I hope that you acquit me of all malice, even as you must acquit me of all design of keeping you out of your own.

I pray that you may live long and prosper, as former Wests have lived and prospered, at Swardham. Will you shake hands with me before I take myself off from Longshire and let me hear that you wish me well, as kinsmen should?'

Unfalteringly he delivered himself of this little speech, as of something well-learned by rote, and at the end he stretched out his strong shapely right hand, and met his cousin's pale and rather shifty eyes.

'Where have we met before?' he exclaimed, involuntarily dropping his hand. 'Surely you were,—but no, that couldn't be—' He stopped, looking puzzled.

'Yes, sir,' Adolphus said, with all the dignity he could muster, 'we *have* met once before, when your physique and your position were both brought to bear upon me, scarcely after the fairest fashion, merely because of a divergence in our political and social prin-

ciples and tenets and apparent standing. But it's no use raking up bygones,' he added hastily, as he saw the other change colour and draw back.

With a great effort John West spoke once more, in painful, measured tones.

'To this moment I never suspected this; nevertheless, I beg you to believe that I am still glad that we have met, and I repeat all that I said at first. But all else that I came prepared to say, to urge on you indeed, had best remain unsaid. The men of our family do not usually swerve from their opinions, nor publish them before they are matured, and remembering the principles and opinions you avowed on that unhappy night, I know it to be useless to attempt the discussion of some topics which I meditated, some notions which I had meant to work out, and now thought of commending to your consideration. I

am sorry that so it should be, but I'm afraid we see things from opposite standpoints.'

'I certainly hold advanced opinions on certain points, and I am the last man to accept the lines laid down by another for working out my responsibilities,' replied Adolphus, grandiloquently.

'As long as you honestly treat responsibilities as such, there is little fear of your failing to content yourself and others.'

'I fancy my honesty of purpose is indubitable,' loftily put in Adolphus.

'Far be it from me to doubt it,' said John West earnestly, 'differently as your plans may work from mine; they are planned, I will hope, for the same end as mine were—the good of those who depend on you. May they be wiser and better than mine ever were. May those right good tenants, always used to be made much of, and tenderly treated as they deserve, find in

you a friend as well as landlord. And now, cousin, good-bye to you; we are the only two left of an old stock, let us wish each other a kind good-bye.'

A limp weak hand was placed for a moment in John West's strong grasp, and a pair of shifty light blue eyes studied the carpet.

'Good-bye,' said the lawful owner of Swardham. 'Of course I know you had rather I didn't ask you to stop, or anything of that sort; I shouldn't in your place. It is best for us to say good-bye.'

'Yes, it is best,' said John West, rearing his proud head, and passed without speech of any other into the busy street.

Mr. Clark, when he briskly entered the room, found his client in no amiable mood.

'There,' he said, savagely interrupting the other's smooth address, 'I knew no good could come of it. I knew he only wanted

to come over me in his confounded lofty way. Courteous! of course he was courteous — too courteous by half. But I'm thankful to think that I sha'n't set eyes on him again in a hurry, and I'll soon send all the pampered crew of old servants packing after their pet squire. They must have studied their way of looking and speaking from him, for all the world as if they could punish me if they liked, but are too noble and polite to take such an advantage. Confound them all.'

Not all Mr. Clark's congratulations and adroit flatteries could soothe the ruffled spirit of the great man. He felt that somehow his impoverished, disinherited cousin had put him down, grandee as he was, and he wrongly believed that it had been his cousin's design to put him down. Nor, as he was swiftly driven in his comfortable carriage home to Swardham, did he

recover his equanimity. So many happy thoughts, couching themselves in such happy terms, kept presenting themselves to his mind, any one of which would, so he thought, have helped him to cut a better figure, had it only occurred to him while his cousin was by. Whereas, though he racked his memory to recall his exact expressions, he could recollect nothing comparable to pearl or ruby to have dropped from his lips.

'Harry Soole himself could scarcely have done it worse,' he muttered in his mortification. 'I might have no command of language at all for anything I got out; I'm uncommonly glad that there was nobody to hear us, and if that old parson tries it on with me on the strength of his friend's report, I flatter myself that he will find I'm not always tongue-tied.'

Refreshing himself by imaginary bursts

of eloquence, of which Mr. Holbrooke should be the victim, Adolphus West strove to regain his complacency, and especially to prevent himself from thinking further about the once inseparable comrade to whom his thoughts had slightingly reverted. Not the least indeed of the thorns which had irked him since his aggrandisement had been implanted owing to his connection with the Sooles. A few months back Dolf van Lennep had been glad enough to be the guest of the well-to-do linen-draper in Longborough, whose only son was his fast friend, and of whose only daughter all their little world considered him the accepted lover. But what had the Adolphus West of to-day to do with such ties and associations? It had been his painful duty, at once and decidedly, to cool towards the family in a manner which had brought about unpleasant scenes between former friends.

The linen-draper, an easy-going man in domestic life, but a thorough man of business, had not done much to insert this rankling thorn in the side of the newly enriched. He loved his girl in his way, and thought highly of her, but he could not venture to assert that she was a mate for the squire of Swardham, and was ready to withdraw from all pretensions to intimacy or matrimonial claim, on a solemn promise that the custom of Swardham Hall should be transferred to his establishment—and perhaps a trifle invested for Sally's benefit, against she should pick up another young man.

But Sally and her brother would none of such proposals, and it was their behaviour which caused the thorn to rankle. At first they pretended to think, unconscionable creatures, that Dolf would be always Dolf to them, in spite of all the glories of Swardham. And when it became

plain that Dolf had vanished away, and left no trace in Adolphus West, Esquire, they refused to acquiesce in a result so natural, and comported themselves in a most irritating fashion. It was indeed a relief when Harry Soole repudiated for himself and his sister all desire for further acquaintance, but his choice of terms, in making this repudiation, was disgustingly forcible and disrespectful. Pretty Sally also, though she cried her bright eyes red, showed a surprising spirit, and, when her defaulting wooer hinted at the possibility of secret interviews for the recreation of the future, ordered him off as surely no squire of high degree was ever dismissed by shopkeeper's daughter since great estates began to be. After all, humiliating as some of it had perhaps been, the matter had ended fairly, and he had slipped out of an embarrassment without so much as having

to unloose his purse-strings, of which unloosing he had, despite his new-found wealth, begun to conceive a holy horror. Let Soole and his sister indulge in heroics to the top of their bent, the squire of Swardham could afford, in his vast exaltation, to turn the deafest of ears to their abuse. It might have been pleasant to have humble friends whom his splendours should dazzle, and just now, though callers were plenty, friends were few; but, after all, there would have been sad incongruity in doing the honours of the Hall for 'Arry and Sally, the shop-boy and shop-girl from Longborough.

CHAPTER XV.

A RIDE ON HAMLET.

IN the big old-fashioned drawing-room of her son's bewildering big house sat the widow Van Lennep, trying to persuade herself that she felt at home, and did not miss her gossips in Britannia Street, or her incursions into the front shop, where it was always well to keep an eye on Rugg the journeyman. At first Mrs. Van Lennep had shown an inclination to spend some of her abundant leisure in consultation with the house-keeper, and inspections of the linen-presses and jam closets; but in deference to her Dolf's wishes, she had abandoned these pursuits, and resigned herself to soli-

tude in the biggest room but one in the big house. Here the poor old woman would have had a sad time of it had she not been fired by a happy ambition, no less than that of fashioning in fancy netting a pair of curtains for each of the three huge windows of the apartment. This afternoon she had hitched her work to one of the bell handles, and was becoming almost elated as she pushed her chair further and further back, to keep pace with the gradual lengthening of her web.

'If I live to finish 'em, please God, I'll make a valance for each window as well, and then we can take down these shabby, stuffy old things in summer. There's nothing so elegant to my mind as a net curtain in a pretty fancy mesh like mine,' and the widow concluded her soliloquy with a scornful glance at the ample hangings of time-honoured brocade.

An impatient rattle at the door-handle caused her just then to jump and drop her implements.

'Ah! Dolf, my dear,' she cried, as her son entered, 'you're come to sit with me a bit, I hope, and we'll have some tea. I'm afraid to ask those solemn chaps for anything unless you are by.'

The young man frowned as he replied,

'If the butler or any footman in this house fails in his respect to you, mother, or neglects your orders, just let me know of it, that's all, and it sha'n't happen twice.'

'Law, my dear, don't fly off with that notion; they are respectful enough, but they frighten me, especially him with the bald head that dresses like a church clergyman. But there is one thing I should like seen to, my dear, which is worse than the men-servants, and that's the pictures, at least some in the dining-room and staircase.

They're not fit to hang in any Christian man's house, I say, and how my sister-in-law could stomach them so many years passes my comprehensions.'

'Do you allude to the family portraits, ma'am? they are—'

"Gracious! Adolphus! they can't be! at least I hope not, for I would be ashamed to think you came of such people! There's one in the dining-parlour,—a long row of queer people without their clothes, with a disgusting old fat man, as drunk as ever he can roll, and children, that should be innocent, squeezing grapes into his wicked old mouth. That's bad enough, but some of the females in other pictures are worse; I can't bear to think of such bare brown trollops; God forbid they should have been Miss Wests, even in Papist days! But the frames are handsome enough—plenty of good stuff in *them*, and as the paintings might

corrupt the servants' minds if we took 'em out and laid 'em in the garrets; wouldn't it be best to fit each with a brass rod and a few rings, and a nice neat curtain, green baize or red, which would look very well, and save me from really not knowing where to turn my eyes at times.'

But in spite of this appeal, nothing could be extracted from the master of the house but an exclamation of—

'Oh nonsense! don't bother, mother. At your age, what can such things signify?' Neither was the old lady's tea-table graced by her son's presence. 'I'm going out riding,' he remarked presently, 'but I shall be back in time to dress for dinner, so we shall meet again.'

The widow had dined at her solitary lunch, and heaved a sigh at the thought of the ordeal to come, when she would have to shake her head at such a sinful number of

dishes, each proffered by the solemn servants who terrified her. Dolf would bate nothing of what he had ascertained to have been habitual in the house—and his parent was expected to behave in all respects conformably.

Leaving his mother to recommence her arduous task, Adolphus was soon equipped and mounted, and rode pensively forth, after a charming canter over the turf, from one of his lodge-gates. It had been with fear and trembling that he had first found himself on horseback, but, thanks to the discretion of his head-groom, he was furnished, at a high price indeed, with a steed of finished manners and amiable disposition, and had, as yet, contrived to keep on excellent terms with his beast (which was indeed easy in his paces as an arm-chair), and to enjoy himself amazingly, cantering upon his own wide green sward. This afternoon,

for the first time, he ventured, unattended as he was, upon the country roads, along which, in meditative mood, he travelled at a walk for two miles or more. At last his horse, who probably had formed his own opinion of the being astride his back, wearied of such gentle progress, and broke into a smart trot, which became all the smarter and more persistent while the rider tried first to pull him into a walk again, then to urge him into a canter. Hamlet, however, was minded to trot, and for once refused to humour his new owner. Now trotting was as yet most inconvenient, not to say detestable, to Hamlet's master. It flurried him, it bumped him, and made him hot and uncomfortable. He tugged at the bridle, wishing that he had been allowed a curb as well as snaffle, but Hamlet only settled into a more rough and business-like trot, and seemed to delight in choosing the hardest

parts of the road. Soon West's hat was tilted over his eyes and his teeth were well nigh chattering. Why had he dispensed with an attendant groom?—it was really horrible to be shaken in this manner, and, save by flinging himself from the saddle, how was he to end such torture? He had a mind to have Hamlet shot, if he ever reached home in safety, or at least he would sell the brute and never see him again. Off at last into the dusty road fell his glossy tall hat, secured, alas! by no string; but on trotted the relentless Hamlet, on towards Snugby village. Heavens! what a plight for the squire of Swardham, to be hurried hatless, breathless, dishevelled, by a trotting horse of which he had plainly lost all control down that long straggling village street. Already was he nearing the cross-roads hard by the church and green, when a little low pony carriage dashed out of one

of the converging lanes, a carriage with a lady driving and a smart little groom behind her, at sight of which, as it rounded the corner, Hamlet suddenly stopped with alarming suddenness, and stood stock-still, gazing at pony and lady with much interest, and well-nigh unseating his unhappy rider by the jerk with which he brought to. With shame and confusion West strove to urge his refractory steed on, and escape if possible unnoticed—but it was not to be. Already had the pony been pulled up, and a frank, silvery voice was crying out:

'Can my servant be of any assistance to you, or can I? You must excuse your horse, he's an old acquaintance of the pony's, I think, and of mine too—aren't you Hamlet, old boy?'

Sulky and shamefaced as Adolphus West felt and looked, he was unable to resist the civilities of this lady fair and free. Fair

she decidedly appeared as he peeped at her, and saw smiling rosy lips and bold dark eyes, and bewildering touzled hair, crowned by a coquettish hat; and of her freedom he felt no desire to complain; she was much nicer than the stiff specimens who had honoured his mother and himself by calling at the Hall!

'Half a mile back, is your hat! Then take my advice, let little Will here ride Hamlet back for it, he'll be there and back like a bird, and you jump in beside me, and we'll be jogging quietly along till the lad catches us up. That's right! in you get.'

He had no idea who she was or where she was taking him, but he was instantaneously fascinated by this woman, so unlike anything he had ever seen. He tried to remember where Hamlet had come from, but he could only recall the heavy

cheque which he had signed for his purchase. Shyly glancing at his companion, as she held in her pony at a sober walk, and chattered gaily, as if she were beside a friend, he noticed how small and delicate was the ear, with a tiny golden splinter-bar pendent from its rosy lobe, which appeared below a thick cluster of golden-tinted dark hair—how small, too, the hand, despite its stout leather glove, which held the reins! He had opportunities, too, now and again, of noting that the bold bright eyes were set off by long lashes and wondrously arched eyebrows of sable hue and accurate outline—and all these things he admired hugely, as well as the small aquiline nose, the graceful neck, and marvellous waist, to which a plainly made cloth jacket sat close. He had scarce stammered a word in reply to the flood of easy chat, mostly about horses and Longshire roads, when the

little groom reappeared with Hamlet and the missing hat. This the youth tendered with an irrepressible grin.

'There was a old cow a mouthing of it, sir,' he said, as West took it in his hands, alas! ruined beyond repair.

True, *one* side of it was merely a little dusty, but from the other the moist lips of the cottager's cow had indeed for ever robbed the glossy smoothness, while her rough tongue had wandered with fatal effect from band to crown in search of delicacies of savour yet unknown.

'Deluded old beast,' laughed the lady; 'how unfortunate that she should have chanced on your hat!—a brand new one too! But it's all the better for me: now I sha'n't let you mount and away! I'm close at home, and you must come in. My brother will be delighted, and I dare say he can find you a hat. He'll like to know what

you think of Hamlet, of course; and it's quite time you were acquainted.'

With this the fair unknown whipped her pony and rattled in fine style down Snugby Street, and round a corner, through a lodge-gate which stood wide open, and along a rather ill-kept drive, while the groom followed on West's horse. Presently a stately but dismal-looking Palladian pile revealed itself from amid trees, and the lady, pointing with her whip, observed:

'There's where we live, you know, Fairy and I; room enough for two people, shouldn't you think!—in fact we want cheering up with a few neighbours most horribly, and, if I hadn't encountered you to-day, I was screwing up my courage to call, which isn't the least in my line, or Fairy's either.'

She seemed to know who he was then, but who could Fairy be?—a sister, or a pet

of some sort? He felt a little bewildered, but very grateful, and far gone in the most hopeless fascination. Soon the weedy drive debouched into a great bleak clearing in the midst of which rose the frowning stony pile, looking big enough for two hundred instead of two, and in another minute the carriage rattled up to a small side-door, stopping short of the vast portico, with its long flights of discoloured steps.

'Come in and be introduced, Mr. West; and I dare say you could do a brandy-and-soda, in which Fairy will be only too happy to keep you in countenance.'

Through a gloomy basement vault, up a dark and crooked stair, across a corner of a vast but dreary hall, with statues and a classically painted ceiling, he followed his conductress, who ushered him at last into a lofty room of moderate size, where the old-fashioned furniture was in considerable

disorder, and a strong scent of tobacco-smoke greeted the nostril.

'We are pigging here just anyhow, you know,' the lady observed, as she upset a fox-terrier from a prim old arm-chair, and flung her hat and gloves upon an open card-table; 'but I dare say it won't afflict you much.'

Adolphus thought that nothing could deeply afflict him while in so bright and bewitching a presence. Talk of Sally Soole's good looks indeed; what was she to this radiant, fearless creature! He admired her more, as she stood bare-headed, than in her out-door gear. Her hair, which though dark-hued was pervaded by gleams of gold, was arranged in a fashion quite strange to him, but, as he thought, infinitely becoming. It was cut rather short, and curled or touzled all over her head, much as the hair of an untidy curly-headed boy

might be, but over the forehead there were longer locks (not unlike the tuft which grows between the horns of Highland cattle), so disposed that between their lower rings and the marvellously arched eyebrows aforesaid, there showed a mere line, scarce a nail's-breadth of white skin. Then her figure, as she stood upright, and set one little foot on the fender to warm, was more bewitchingly displayed than as she had sat, wolf-skin on knee, in her little carriage.

'Ah,' she said, apparently unconscious of his gaze, 'here is Fairy, come to save me the trouble of a search.'

The door opened, and with astonishment West beheld a man six foot in height and broad in the shoulders; a man neatly dressed in somewhat tightly-fitting clothes; a youngish man with a fresh-coloured face, clean shaven save for a yellow imperial

which graced his chin, and rather good features of a keen and knowing type.

'Fairy, this is Mr. West; we made acquaintance in the lanes, and he's good-natured enough to waive ceremony and let me bring him in. Mr. West, my brother FitzRaymond.'

In increasing bewilderment West looked from one to the other; if this tall fellow were FitzRaymond, how or why was he also Fairy?—and which name could be shared by this charming creature? The tall man, with a good-humoured laugh, came up and shook hands, saying as he did so:

'Very glad to make your acquaintance, though I dare say my sister, who introduces us, hasn't the least right to do so.'

The fair sister laughed musically.

'Fairy sticking up for the conventionalities—well done!' she said. 'Well, sir, since you are now formally introduced to our

neighbour, you shall ceremoniously introduce me to Mr. West, and then we'll be done with that humbug.'

'Allow me then,' replied the brother, with mock solemnity, 'to present to you my sister, Lady Georgiana FitzRaymond.'

Adolphus bowed confusedly, as it rushed upon him that the tall fellow, so puzzlingly addressed as Fairy, must be none other than the Earl FitzRaymond, and that the house must be Beausite, of which he had often heard, in common with all the dwellers in those parts.

Mention has been made in these pages of a certain old Earl FitzRaymond, who had lived at Beausite in much quietude and domesticity till his death, some six months before West's visit. This old gentleman had found himself, some twelve years back, left a widower, with an only son and an only daughter, the pair who now inhabited

the big house. But in these, his children, the old peer had found little comfort or sympathy. The son, better known than trusted in all sporting circles as Lord Fairford (whence the familiar abbreviation Fairy), never honoured the paternal roof by his presence, which was bestowed on fast society of the racing and sporting order; and of late years never communicated with his father, who had altogether declined to embarrass himself or his estates for the benefit of his extravagant and often insolvent heir. Neither was the Lady Georgiana more disposed than her brother to cheer her sire's declining years.

After a longish career as a spoiled and wilful beauty, this lady had, to the old lord's distress and chagrin, insisted on marrying a handsome and penniless cousin. The union proving unhappy, and a separation ensuing, the father was not slow to offer a home to his only daughter. But

Lady G. (as she was commonly called) dreaded the humdrum existence at Beausite, and being of no very dutiful turn of mind, preferred a strange rambling life, mostly on the continent, in the course of which many tongues wagged at her expense, and not a few scandals attached, falsely or truly, to her name. Thus deserted by both children, the old earl, a man of quiet and homely tastes, found his loneliness unbearable, and presently brought a new wife to Beausite, in the person of the sister of a neighbouring rector. This lady, who was of gentle birth but slender dower, bore him several children, and made his latter days very happy indeed; and for her sake and her babes, he had charged the estate so heavily as to excite the hearty maledictions of his heir, who was indeed so deeply involved as to need every shilling which could be raised on the family property. The new earl

found himself master of a great dull house, full of old-fashioned furniture, and in some need of restorations within and without, and of an income which would have been somewhat insufficient for the maintenance of his position, even had he been free from the terrible liabilities incurred during his career on the turf. Nevertheless, he had come to take possession, though without any intention of permanently residing at Beausite, and had summoned his sister, for whom he had more affection than for any other living creature, from her foreign rambles to share his sojourn in Longshire.

'I suppose you'll try to let the place,' Lady G. had said, looking with disfavour at its size and faded appointments, so different from her late surroundings in Wiesbaden or Paris. 'It smells of that woman's nursery; yes, it *tastes* of her tea and tracts.'

'I'd let it fast enough, if any one could

be found fool enough to rent it,' her brother replied; 'I only wish for my part it would be burned down before the insurance runs out.'

Here then the pair had been living for some months past, 'pigging,' as Lady G. termed it, without any attempt at such establishment as is usual in the mansion of a peer, and doubtless finding Longshire quite as dull as they had prophesied. To their ears, as to all ears in Longshire, had come the strange tale how that Squire West was dispossessed of Swardham, of all his acres, his income, and place in the world; and how that a new squire, and truer West, had emerged from obscurity to take his place. Now John West had been no favourite with either of the FitzRaymonds. The lord called him a prig and a stick, for John West disliked horse-racing and betting and all the devices of the children

of the turf; and the Lady G. remembered that he had never been numbered among the adorers who fluttered round her, when she burst on the world at the Longshire balls long ago. So they both voted the change a change for the better, and agreed that it would be well to make some move towards the new man. Till this day, however, the move had remained unmade, for, though the earl had sold him a horse, he had, perhaps fortunately for Adolphus, dealt only with the Swardham head-groom in the transaction. But now fortune had delivered this lucky beggar (as Lord FitzRaymond called him) into their hands, and they were inclined to make themselves agreeable to the representative of so much money. Accordingly the brandy-and-soda were produced, cigars followed, and, Lady G. consenting to just one cigarette, the time slipped on in pleasant talk, till Adolphus

found himself hopelessly late for his dinner and irretrievably fascinated by his new friends, but especially by the reckless gaiety of Lady G., who seemed to him the most brilliant and enchanting of her sex. If art had been called in by the lady to repair the ravages of time (and perhaps dissipation), innocent Adolphus was all unconscious of that art. To him those pink-hued cheeks and rosy lips, those pencilled brows, the golden gleams that lit the dark curls, were all nature's contributions to a sum total of surpassing loveliness. And the continental freedom of the lady's address, the absence of ceremony and stiffness which reigned around her, seemed to him simply perfection. In short he was intoxicated at once, and fell the easiest of her many captives, at this Circe's tiny feet.

'By Jove, Georgie,' quoth the earl, when at last West had reluctantly departed, '*you*

shall sell him two or three more of my horses. How I wish I had kept Hamlet till after this fellow had been so smitten! I never saw such a case. Poor little cad! he has a rough time before him.'

'He is a much better fellow than his cousin anyhow, and a godsend. I mean that he shall prove a real godsend to both of us; but he is my property, remember, and I won't have you sticking him with any screw of yours just yet. He shall be more profitable than that if you'll leave him to me at first, as you ought, for I shall have all the hard work. Fancy calling on his mother! I must borrow a bonnet from my maid, and hunt up a few of the pious leaflets that woman used to dispense here. They say the old maternal party has never lived out of a shop, and wants to put all the statues at Swardham into brown holland drawers—but I dare say she's as good as

any of the frumps about here, and quite as well-bred as our beloved step-mamma. And now let's inquire whether any preparations for dinner are making in that ghastly old cavern down-stairs. My conquest has given me an appetite.'

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